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# Prologue

[image]

Step by step, he followed the scents. Every movement was planned. Every slight sense, every change in the air, was expected.

Up ahead, he noticed the edge of the ravine. The tree line ended, and a few tree lengths away, a rocky edge was apparent. Unaware of the depth, he noted to keep his distance. The hunter prowled forward, stalking the hare he followed out of the forest. Now, the prey was sniffing amongst the rocks, inching out toward the ravine.

The sun was setting, and its bright rays masked the his thick, red pelt as he inched toward the hare. Completely unaware, he slinked forward.

He took a single breath, before he surged forward. As soon as he took off, the hare jumped up in shock. With all of his strength, he heaved his weight forward and propelled himself toward the hare. His claws reached out and dug themselves into the pelt of the hare, and as they fell toward the ground as one, his claws sank deeper.

Falling as one, his jaws formed around the hare's fragile neck. Clamping down, his fangs sank into the soft flesh of the hare. As they both struggled, he reached the edge of the ravine and faced the edge below. It seemed deeper than it really was, but he took no chances. He fell back, with the limp hare still locked in his jaws.

On his back, he gazed up at the evening sky, covered with an array of reds and violets. Laying there, the sight was so mesmerizing, he did not move. The hare splayed against his belly, still have off heartbeats before petering into silence. His eyes stayed focused on the sky until a sudden figure blocked his view.

"The assessment did not include gazing at the evening sky," Horsetail reminded the apprentice with a scoff. Redpaw popped up, hare still clamped in his jaws. Alarmed at his mentor's sudden

presence. Redpaw set the prey at Horsetail's feet with a chuckle.

"I thought I lost you back there," Redpaw chuckled.

"No! I was just...enjoying the forest," Horsetail said hurriedly, and glanced away. "It has been awhile."

"We've been migrating through forests for moons..."

"Hush. Carry the prey and follow me."
Redpaw frowned, but picked up the hare, and followed Horsetail, who walked along the ravine until they reached a path that led down into the ravine. Down the path, Redpaw could smell many old, and new scents. *Rotten prey, dogs, foxes, badgers*...and most surprising. *Cats*.

"Horsetail," he tried to call out, but the hair mumbled his words resulting in a muffled mess. Horsetail flicked his tail to silence him.

Passing small openings and caves in the ravine, he could see the remanence of many things. Stray sticks and miss were littered across the rocks. Bones and decaying prey were stuff in some of the crevices of the rocks. Mass shadows were cast across the ravine, as the sun set, making it harder to examine the area.

Horsetail lead him toward the center, nearby a huge rock pile. He sniffed the opening of a den before leading Redpaw inside. He laid down on the stone floor before resting his head upon his paws. After resting for a few moments, he raised his head.

"Can we eat now?"

"As I share something with you..."

"What? Is something wrong?"

"Nothing, Redpaw," he sighed. "You have passed your assessment. But there is something you must know before you shall receive your warrior name."

"I am ready," Redpaw declared.

"You must promise. After this night, never ask me of these events again. You can never share this with Raspypaw, or any other cat," he quickly explained with a strict and heavy tone. The way he spoke burdened Redpaw and engrained the promise in his mind. Horsetail had never spoken to him in this way, except when discussing the fall-out of the Clans.

"I promise."

"This was once the camp of SkyClan,"

"Your Clan?"

"Let me speak!" Horsetail snapped. He took another breath before continuing. "Yes."

"Where did it go?"

"It's not where, but how. SkyClan has had a troubled history. Legends, stories, Elder's accounts and LightClan tell us this. However, there has never been more a tale of corruption than in the last twenty-four moons of SkyClan. But I will tell you the fraction of this. I will tell you the reason evil embedded itself in this Clan, and has poisoned the future of countless destinies," Horsetail declared. A fury was ablaze within in chest, and Redpaw could sense it. "As many conflicts, this one began with a single rogue, her name was Colette."

# Chapter 1

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 6 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. Expecting kits.

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 2 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 2 moons.

Larkkit- gray tabby she cat with pale green eyes. Newborn.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. Newborn.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes.

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes.

Jocasta- a Russian blue she cat.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom, only a kitten.

Gretel- a young Russian blue she cat, only a kitten.

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Scampering up the rocks, the she cat stumbled in the dark shadows of the ravine. In the night, her pawsteps were not as clear and she found herself more clumsy than usual. Taking a few breaths as she reaches the top of the path, she stepped toward the leader's den, before sitting before it calmly.

"Fernstar!" Firfoot hushed herself, at the sudden realization she might wake the sleeping camp. Withdrawing, she stepped away. *Maybe this wasn't the best idea...* Waking one's leader in the middle of the night, is not a common occurrence, even if they were litter mates. Firfoot tried to remember the last time she spoke to her sister.

"Yes."

Firfoot whipped around. Fernstar rose to her paws and came to meet her sister at the entrance of the den. Her bright green eyes were drowsy and yet darkened by shadows. Beside her, her mate Ryepelt lifted his head, not completely awake.

"What is it? Is that Firfoot?"

"Swampfur sent for me to let you know. Sorrelfoot's kitting," Firfoot informed her with a small smile. Fernstar was surprised yet delighted. Glancing back at her mate, she collected her thoughts.

"Come on, you'll get Sandkit, Horsekit, and Shrewkit and bring them back here," Fernstar told her mate, who blinked groggily.

"What for?"

"Those three will only be a nusance. Shinyflower isn't sleeping in there, tonight," Fernstar chuckled. Ryepelt grumbled and groaned at the thought of leaving his warm nest for the three rascals. "Fine, you sleep. Firfoot and I will go."

As Ryepelt drifted back into sleep, Fernstar and Firfoot left the leader's den and trotted down the rocky path, before turning left, and following it up again until they reached the small cave, home to the nursery. Along the path, Fernstar couldn't help but make small chat with her sister.

"It's been awhile, hasn't it?"

"Yes. It has," Firfoot said meekly. Fernstar noticed her hesitation and her breathed hitched. Finding the right words were not easy for her.

"I... I cannot imagine what you must be going through," Fernstar began. "But if I could be here for you, and give you peace of mind. I want you to know that no one has forgotten. We will not forget him."

"Thank you, *Fernstar,"* Firfoot whispered. "How were the last patrols? Did you speak with anyone?"

"We don't negotiate with rogues. Not after what McNaire did to Adderstrike," Fernstar stated. Afraid of her unwavering authority, Firfoot tried to contain her thoughts. But her thoughts, plans and speculation had come to this.

"I know," she replied. "McCallistar is greedy. We could make a deal. Send McNaire into the ground in exchange for them. We could bring back *Opal... My daughter...*"

"*Firfoot.*" Fernstar's plea struck hard. Firfoot stepped back, closing her eyes. "It's too painful."

Resisting the urge to comfort her, she had to face her duties. In the end, all she confronted were the cringing memories. *I'm sorry Firfoot! We tried... There were too many of them*. Her words rushed into her mind. Regrets of the past clouded her present thoughts, polluting her heart. "*You traded them. You traded their lives for land! You let them take her!" Firfoot screamed in a viscous rage. At the time, Fernstar only had excuses. "I lost a life! We lost our deputy! Our warriors..."*

*The past is the past.* Fernstar told herself. The leader turned away from her inner turmoil, to complete her other duties. Ignoring the guilt, she didn't speak another word to her sister. There is nothing she could say.

Right outside the nursery, Shrewkit and Sandkit were tousling. Beside them Horsekit sat complacently until his eyes widened, noticing their mother.

"Fernstar!"

"Come on you three, Firfoot going to take you to my den," Fernstar explained as she passed authority to her sister. Firfoot nodded and lead the three. Leaving, she could still hear their excited chatter of her litter.

"I've never been to the leader's den!"

"Yes we have," Sandkit contradicted her sister.

"Nuh-uh!"

"Ah-huh!"

Fernstar held a small smile as she watched the four go. Firfoot watched them with such care, yet such sadness. *She is beautiful. Like her mother. More beautiful than new-leaf*. Fernstar couldn't bear to watch. She then turned her attention to the nursery.

Even outside, she could hear Swampfur comforting the she cat as she kitted. Peaking inside, she could see her brother, Swampfur overlooking the she cat. Sorrelfoot's pale green eyes were closed as she focused painfully. As Fernstar glanced inside, she suddenly noticed that Sorrelfoot's mate was not present.

*Where's Grayfrost?* She immediately asked herself. Someone would have notified him if his mate had gone into labor. Feeling personally responsible for her deputy, Fernstar decided she would find the whereabouts of Grayfrost as soon as possible.

As soon as the kitting was finished, Fernstar slipped inside the nursery, ready to greet the new members of the Clan. Beside

Sorrelfoot, lay two little mounds. The newborn kits were silent and peaceful, as they began to suckle. The sight was very different from Fernstar's kitting, where Shrewkit would not stop mewling, and where Sandkit kept climbing on top of Horsekit. At the same time, Fernstar would never trade her kits.

"They are beautiful, Sorrelfoot," Fernstar cherished the sight, and Sorrelfoot seemed to be glowing with pride.

"They are. The tom is Sparrowkit. And the she cat is Larkkit," she informed her with a smile. It then turned grim as she remembered how Grayfrost and her had chosen the names together. *He promised he would be here.*

"He will be back any moment, I'm certain. I sent him out, I wasn't thinking," Fernstar sighed, hoping Sorrelfoot would believe the excuse. Lying was rare for Fernstar, but in scenarios such as these, she had to keep the best interests of the Clan.

"Thank you. I think we'll be alright the rest of the night. Thank you, Swampfur," Sorrelfoot said, looking to the clan's medicine cat. The tom nodded before leaving the Nursery, and heading back toward the medicine cat den. Fernstar gave he she cat a curt nod before heading back to her own den.

As she took the same path back to her den, the brisk and cool air of leaf-fall. She was surprised at the coolness of the stones, and the serenity of the night. Usually, distant howls and barks of the nearby twolegplace would ring throughout the night. Strangely, it was utterly silent.

It remained that way until large blue eyes appeared at the edge of the ravine. Illuminated in the shadows, the large tom leaped down onto the stones, hopping from each one until he made his way on the path. Coming into full moonlight, his gray thick fur was long and tabby pelt was fully recognizable.

As he travelled down the path, Fernstar veered from her course, crossing to his flank. She cleared her voice and caught the warrior's attention, his ears perked with surprise.

"Grayfrost!" She called out in a hushed voice, careful not to wake any cats or alarm Sorrelfoot.

"Fernstar?"

"Where have you been?" She whispered calmly. Glancing around she noticed no cat, and neither did he. She took a better look at his appearance. He did not seem to be hurt, or troubled in any way. His pelt was groomed nicely, evidence he had not been hunting. His scent however, reeked of twolegs.

"Strolling."

"I wish you would tell me next time," Fernstar sighed. She was fond of her young deputy. Still, she feared him at times. He could place himself in unnecessary conflict due to his pride.

"What's the matter? Did something happen?"

"Grayfrost, Sorrelfoot went into kitting," Fernstar said.

"Is she alright?"

"Yes, yes. So are the kits."

"What's the problem?" Grayfrost asked with a puzzled look. Fernstar was taken aback. *This is his first litter. Perhaps he's just unaware...*

"Most toms are there for their she cats when she has the kits," Fernstar replied.

"Most toms sit outside and wait anxiously. I'm glad I won't have to go through the anxiety... Everything's alright?"

"Everything is alright," Fernstar confirmed. As the two split, Fernstar couldn't help but sigh. *I hope Sorrelfoot will understand.*

After conversing with Fernstar, Grayfrost trotted down the path only a few strides before reaching the Nursery. Taking a breath, he braced himself, and slipped inside the den.

Immediately upon entering, he eyes were averted to the two

bundles pressed against Sorrelfoot's belly, safe guarded by her tail. As soon as he entered, her ears perked and she came to attention.

Smiling she took her tail away, revealed more of their newborn kits. The she cat, Larkkit squealed as her mother did and fumbled blindly, while her brother Sparrowkit was silent and calm. Both kits shared their father's tabby pelts. Larkkit's was a dark gray, like her father while her brother was just a shade light.

"Their names?"

"Sparrowkit and Larkkit, both creatures of the sky," Sorrelfoot grinned.

"I am glad we went with the sky theme. No Stormkit though?"

"No," she chuckled.

"Maybe next litter?"

"Maybe not," she rephrased. Grayfrost laughed and returned the smile before laying beside her and the kits. Soaking in the happiness, Sorrelfoot wanted it to last. Inhaling the sweet warmth of the nursery, she looked up with soft eyes.

"If you leave that place... We have nothing to lose," Sorrelfoot whispered. Nuzzling into his pelt, she closed her eyes, cherishing the time she had with him. He took a breath, and closed his eyes. *It's far too dangerous*.

"I understand," he whispered. As the two Warriors peacefully rested, one of the kits were restless. Mewling, Sparrowkit shifted and rose his head before making a great yawn.

Fondly, Grayfrost gazed down at the kits. "My children..."

"*Our* children," Sorrelfoot replied with an affectionate lick.

# Chapter 2

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. Kits: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

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Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

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**Kits**:
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Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 2 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. Newborn.

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McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes. Kits: Messi, Wesley, Madala, and Rose

Messi- a golden furred tom.

Wesley- a black and white furred tom.

Madala- a golden tabby she cat.

Rose- a black she cat with white patches.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes. Kits: Maria and Ava

Maria- a dark furred tortoiseshell she cat.

Ava- a light tabby she cat.

Jocasta- a Russian blue she cat. Kits: Ned and Gretel

Ned- a young Russian blue tom, only a kitten.

Gretel- a young Russian blue she cat, only a kitten.

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Racing through the fields, running under the sun, jumping from limb to limb, the she cat reveled in the joy her life once had. Joy like this, that only existed when she was free. Then, she awoke from the dream. Blinking groggily, she lifted her head.

"Wake up," the order came in a hiss before the cat disappeared. Alarmed, Sage looked around frantically. The many she cats around her were frantic, leaving their nests in the center of the barn, and splitting up, cowering against the barn walls.

*No... No... Fox dung!* She slept late, and no one warned her. Glancing at the kits beside her, she looked at the two, skinny for their age.

Her eyes flicked over to the side of the barn. Through the hole in the roof, no light of day was visible. It was night. Catching the sight of a ginger she cat, her eyes widened in recognition.

"Ruby!" She called out. The she cat whipped around to face her. Blue eyes widened with anxiety, and she frowned at the sight of Sage.

"What is it!"

"What's happening?"

"He is coming at dawn. We had a small tip-off, and everyone pounced. Hurry," Ruby advised before jumping back into work.

A strong burst of fear came over Sage, rising from her nest, she groaned at the soreness on her flank. Bruised and scabbing, her resistance was always retaliated. Beneath her, the kits wriggled at the sudden lack of warmth.

Leaving them, she shot across the barn, slipping next to another she cat. Examining the cracks of the barn, she could smell no trace of mice.

"Get away!" The she cat beside her snapped.

"I need a mouse.."

"We all do! Get away, dung!"

Hissing, Sage left and shot over to the next crack in the barn. Sniffing intently, she was determined to pull out any remanence of a mouse, a bug or any rodent. Soon, her efforts failed, for it was useless. The loud commotion, chatter and wails from kits sent any prey away.

"He is outside!" Jocasta shouted.

Collectively, the she cats all stopped their attempts. Racing to their nests, the she cats all sat up straight, as he preferred. Some rushed

to make themselves presentable. Some were lucky enough to groom themselves and their kits earlier, and were able to sit calmly. Sage and her kits were not as lucky.

Tucking her she kits under her tail, she hushed them before gazing up at attention. Silence quickly fell over the barn like a hawk silenced its prey. Only the unmannerly kits squirmed and let out a few meows and cries.

Leering, the large tom slipped into the barn. Large and in charge, his black and white pelt was inherited by most of his offspring. His yellow eyes swept over the barn and the she cats, before he stepped inside.

As soon as he entered, his nose wrinkled at the smell. Beside him, was Jocasta, placed in charge of his barn and she cats. She stood toward the back of him, head lowered in submission.

McNaire. At first hear of his name, Sage thought it was strange and silly. Although she learned that all rogues are strange, she also came to learn that there is nothing silly about McNaire.

Walking down the makeshift aisle, he uttered no word. One by one, each she cat pushed forward any of the prey she had managed to collect for him. He would either bury the prey for the moon, or add them to his massive pile. Their contributions only secured the tom's position. By keeping him fed, their captor was fat and muscular.

When he came to Opal, one of the most senior she cats, she placed forth two mice, her head lowered in submission. Intrigued, he sat before her, watching her intently.

"You think flattery is acceptable," McNaire gritted through his teeth. Opal did not respond. Tightening her tail around her four frightened kits, she said nothing. "You are correct."

Looking up, he glanced at the other she cats. "Once again, Opal, the she cat of the Clans, has proven the correct way to serve!"

Frozen in fear, the other rogues closed their eyes at his words.

Speculation and concern took place in all the she cat's minds. *Will he act? Will he kill tonight?*

"Opal, you shall be rewarded, in time."

Continuing his path, he did not stop again until he faced Sage. Before her, he saw no mouse. No contribution.

Crying rang through the barn, as McNaire pulled the two kits away. Releasing her tail from them, the kits fell forward. They fumbled blindly without their mother beside them, and the unfamiliar tension added a heavy anxiety. Eyes low, the mother of the two she cats was reluctant, yet uttered no word.

"How old are they?"

"Barely a two moons."

"Shut them up," the black and white tom spat, before taking the scruff of one of the she kits. Taking the kit to the side, he sat it down, inspecting it.

A dark Tortoiseshell she cat, the young kit was in contrast to her litter mate who was a bright tabby. At this, he grimaced.

"What did you name them?"

"That one is Maria. And the other is Ava..."

"Maria is leaving," he said coldly. McNaire placed the kit by Jocasta, and it only continued to cry.

"Will it be..."

"No. But you will, tomorrow's nightfall."

"McNaire," a she cat whispered beside Sage. At this, his eyes widened and he turned to the rogue.

White and pure, the new rogue was by no doubt, the prettiest rogue

yet. However, the new rogue was pregnant, and suffering. He could not punish her for speaking out, but he was suddenly intrigued. "She gave me her prey, for I did not have anything..."

"You have only been present for two moons? Maybe less. Do not lie, to me." Colette shuddered at his tone and she nodded. Stepping back he inhaled before looking back to Sage. "Take care of Ava. When she is a moon, and we have another mother to nurse her, you will go to McCallistar. I am finished here. Give your prey to Colette, who will bring them to my den."

As Jocasta picked up Maria, McNaire led the way out of the barn. Blinking, it seemed surreal without Maria. Sage felt one pawstep closer to true herself. Gazing down at Ava, she was conflicted. If she raised Ava, the kit would be taken away anyway. McNaire had already made his choice. She was to be sent to McCallistar which meant she would spend another six moons, perhaps the rest of her life, in captivity.

"I am sorry, Sage," Colette whispered beside her.

"Sorry for what?" Sage asked plainly. "They are his kits. Not mine."

The bold statement took Colette by surprise, but she had other matters to be concerned by. Responsible for delivering the prey, if Colette failed, the consequences could be harsh.

Each she cat placed their mouse before her, only Opal had two. In the end, it was determined she would have to make ten trips for the many mice. Sighing, she picked up hers first, and set off. Outside the barn, a small dirt path led to a fallen shack. The makeshift shelter was home to McNaire and McCallistar. Brothers and rogues, the two governed the small area, and dictated the region. At some point, all she cats were brought to the edge of the twolegplace, where a farm used to reside.

Weary of their presence, she quickly set down the mouse beside the entrance. Before she could run back for more, a voice halted her.

"Colette," his gruff voice stopped her. She turned to face McNaire,

but was careful not to look into his eyes. Stories had said how he killed a she cat for rising to his level and viewing herself as equal.

"Yes," she replied.

"When are the kits due?"

"Soon," she answered. Her belly was heavy and visibly swollen. Any moment, she could give birth. After that, any moment, they could be taken away.

"I look forward to seeing them," McNaire said. "It was right of you, to try to save Sage's kit. You will make a good mother, here. But in the future, do not spark such defense for another cat's failures."

"Yes, McNaire," she replied. "May I ask a question?"

"You may."

"What will happen to the she kit?"

"She was taken to McCallistar's barn. Enough. Go back, go to the barn. Fetch the rest of the prey..."

Colette immediately did as instructed, taking off to collect it and bring it to him. Eventually, she finished the strenuous task, only strenuous due to her abnormal weight. When finished, McNaire dismissed her without another glance or word.

Relieved, she set off to her nest. Inside, she noticed each pregnant mother. Ruby, not with kits yet, had her first litter taken away. And now, she was in early pregnancy with her second.

Opal nursed her four kits quietly, while mothers and pregnant mothers alike rested, Colette rested in her nest, eyes opened wide. Restless and fidgety, she was burdened with a choice to make. Gazing over the cats, the darkness hid her steps, as she slipped out a large door. Into the back garden, broken fences littered the area, and remanence of horses that once trotted along the grass.

The moon rested in the sky, half there, half gone. Taking a breath, she enjoyed the temporary silence, and the fresh air. For once, it didn't stink of milk and kitting, just the outdoors.

"Colette..."

"Oh! No," she whispered. Turning, she saw Jocasta at the doorway. "I'm sorry, I couldn't sleep and-"

"I saw you. The other night," Jocasta revealed with a calm tone. "I will help you, if you ask. I know..."

"If McNaire discovers, he'll kill the kits. I have to get out before. Before that happens. Please Jocasta," Colette begged. Within, she could feel the kits full of life, full of potential, and full of love.

"He will not come back for another two days, perhaps..."

"Where do I go?"

"There is a Clan," Jocasta began. "Beyond the fields, beyond the trees."

"SkyClan? Is that what they call it?"

"Yes. Plead with them. Ask them for protection. Find your friend," she instructed.

"What if he... What will he do?"

"He injures. He threatens. But you have nothing here that you hold dear," Jocasta stated with a sadness. "And Colette..."

"Don't forget. About us..."

"I will come back for you. And Sage, Ruby and Opal. None of you deserve this," Colette said.

"Go. Before someone hears..."

Struck with a burst of urgency, Colette trotted off as fast as she could. As she did, she realized how easy it was. In her fears and thoughts, she thought there would be more resistance. Soon, she smelled the potent stench of wild cats.

Maybe he knows. Maybe Jocasta is tricking me. Suddenly paranoid, Colette headed for the hidden foliage of the forest. Taking off toward it, she found the tall trees overwhelming, as well as the many scents. Engulfing her senses with every whiff, it was like nothing she had experienced.

When she expected the forest to split, it continued. The forest seemed eternal. Losing herself, she gazed around at the canopy. As she did, she grew dizzy and had to rest by a tree. It was then when she smelled something else in the air.

The fur on her back slowly rose to a point, and a fear rushed through her. A storm is coming. With no shelter, she had no choice but to continue her quick pace through the forest. Rushing and telling herself to push forward, exhaustion hit her like a monster on the thunderpath. Her paws went weak and a sharp pain stung her belly.

Moaning in pain, she fell to her paws. Weakly, she crawled over toward the base of a tree. Gradually, rain began to pelt the forest. Above her, leaves caught most of the raindrops before they dropped onto her.

Panting and shivering, she cried in the rain. Missing her nest. Missing her kin. Missing her home. Soon, the rain struck down hard when a flash erupted in the sky, for all to see.

A loud rumble rolled through the forest, through the ravine and the whole of the twolegplace. Thunder rolled through the clouds, roaring and striking fear in even the bravest cats. Once again, a lightning strike shot across the sky and the wind howled before a rumble shook the forest floor. Colette sent a silent prayer of hope to the violent sky, producer of such a powerful storm. *Help my kits...*

# Chapter 3

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 6 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**: Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. Expecting kits.

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 2 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 2 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. Newborn.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. Newborn.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes. Kits: Messi, Wesley, Madala, and Rose

Messi- a golden furred tom.

Wesley- a black and white furred tom.

Madala- a golden tabby she cat.

Rose- a black she cat with white patches.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes. Kits: Maria and Ava

Maria- a dark furred tortoiseshell she cat.

Ava- a light tabby she cat.

Jocasta- a Russian blue she cat. Kits: Ned and Gretel

Ned- a young Russian blue tom, only a kitten.

Gretel- a young Russian blue she cat, only a kitten.

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"Yellowbird!" A voice called out. "YELLOWBIRD!"

"What is it!" The she cat bounced up from her meal. At the entrance of camp, Honeypaw was racing toward her in a panic.

As the she cat reached her mentor, she paced in a panic. "I'm really sorry..."

"What is it?"

"I had no idea what to do? I have never met one of them before... So please don't be mad at me," Honeypaw braced herself, rambling on with the explanation. Yellowbird frowned and stepped toward her apprentice.

"What is it!" She demanded for the last time.

"I found a rogue. I said she could come to camp," Honeypaw said with a worried expression. "She is in pretty bad shape. She was out in the storm!"

"You had no authority! We have to get someone, *oh geez*... I said *hunting*!"

"I did everything you said! She just popped up! I'm really sorry," Honeypaw exasperated.

"I will get Fernstar. You get Swampfur and Shinyflower, and go immediately! NOW!" Yellowbird barked before racing over to the leader's den. Gazing inside, she saw no one and panicked. Forgetting camp, she ran down the rocks and into the base of the gorge. Racing towards the lower forest, she followed the scent of the last patrol.

Meanwhile, Honeypaw fetched Swampfur and Shinyflower as promised and tried to explain everything on the way. Quickly reiterating what happened, Honeypaw barely had time to catch her breath. As both Shinyflower and Swampfur processed the information, they quickened their paces, and shot forward.

Worried expressions covered both cat's faces. Any mention or presence of a rogue could mean trouble. Shinyflower's thoughts kept shifting to the many moons ago. The horror they faced when they attacked camp.  Shinyflower only escaped by hiding in the creek. The thought kept them running toward the spot.

"Honeypaw?"

"She's right here!" Following the apprentice's voice, they found the rogues at the base of a tree. Pure white, the she cat was wet and struggling to breathe. Swampfur was immediately concerned with her condition.

"She's so young," Shinyflower muttered in disbelief. *Younger and younger the rogues*.

"We need to get her to camp, now. In my den, I can treat her properly... We have another problem," Swampfur explained as he pressed his ear to her belly. Looking to his clanmates, he shook his head. "She is very pregnant. She may have lost the kits in the storm."

"No!" Honeypaw gasped, in horror.

"Help me, it'll take us three to get her down the path..."

The journey taking the she cat back to camp, was a struggle. But eventually, the three clan cats managed to place the rogue inside the medicine cat den, upon a dry nest. There, Swampfur immediately began fetching supplies. Glancing to Honeypaw, he began to bark orders.

"I need wet moss, now!"

"On it!" Honeypaw exclaimed, before racing out the medicine cat den, and down the path. Moss in jaws, she raced to the creek at the bottom of the gorge.  Dipping the moss into the water, she let the water soak into the plant before trotting back toward the den.

Placing the moss inside the den, she fetched another dry one and raced back down the path. Repeating the same process, she did it a few more times before she was confronted by a gruff voice.

"What in StarClan are you doing!" Silverclaw grumbled with narrow eyes.

"Fetching moss for the rogue-"

"The rogue!" He exclaimed.

"I'll explain it when I get back," Honeypaw promised. And she did, as soon as she returned. "I was hunting. A pregnant, sick rogue was out in the storm last night! She was on our territory and Swampfur said she needed immediate treatment!"

"What in... You just found her?"

"Yes! I have to go see if Swampfur needs anything else, Silverclaw. Need anything?" Honeypaw checked.

"Some mouse bile... I got a few ticks," he said glancing over his pelt.

"On it!" Honeypaw smiled and scrambled away. Silverclaw chuckled before returning to the elders.

Groggily, Colette came to her senses. The strong scent mint and moss, amongst the surrounding air. Her mind was flooded with the scents of strange plants, and cats. Opening her eyes, her vision was

a bit blurred but she could make out two shadows, overlooking her and murmuring to themselves.

Her eyelids were heavy, and although the fear engulfed her, she was too exhausted to give the effort. Drifting back in sleep, a voice called out to her.

"Don't leave!" The voice demanded.

"Is she alright?"

"Just fading back into her sleep. I am worried her health may deteriorate if she is not awake to take these herbs and to be an advocate for herself," Swampfur explained glancing over the she cat with concern. "Make sure Honeypaw ends these rumors. Tell her the matter is being dealt with. She has to be taken care of."

"What's wrong with her?" Shinyflower asked with weary eyes.

"She was out in the storm. Out in our territory. She either caught a sickness before she came, or got it while sniffing our territory. Either way, she needs treatment..."

"What if she infects others?" Shinyflower panicked, glancing down at her belly. Pregnant and ready to kit in a moon or earlier, she naturally worried about the health of her future kits.

"We are fully capable of defending ourselves from White cough and Green cough. The catmint is growing fine," Swampfur assured her before turning his attention back to the rogue she cat. Bending over her he prodded her gently with his paw. *Wake up*.

As Colette mumbled in the midst of a groggy daze, Shinyflower turned to Yellowbird, sitting outside the Medicine cat den. The she cat peeked inside curiously, and Shinyflower did her best to block the she cat's view.

"Fernstar still isn't back," Yellowbird explained. As the Warrior noticed Swampfur leaning over a cat, she stepped back.

"Is that the rogue?"

"Shut up, and get back to Honeypaw!" Shinyflower snapped. "Swampfur is treating a patient. Nothing more."

Yellowbird grimaced and ran off to find Honeypaw. Shinyflower retreated into the Medicine Cat den before glancing at the she cat. Swampfur's calls to wake, had successfully waken the she cat.

Two wise blue eyes gazed back at Swampfur and her, as they travelled in a frenzy. If Colette wasn't so weak, she would have shot out of her nest and out the den.

"Who are-"

"What is your name?" Swampfur cut the she cat off, and gathered the herbs he collected from his stores. Colette frowned but replied calmly.

"I am Colette. Why am I-"

"We found you on SkyClan territory, sick and pregnant. You needed help and once you are healthy, you can leave immediately, unless Fernstar has other thoughts."

"SkyClan? You are SkyClan.."

"Be quiet, please," Swampfur gritted through his fangs before continuing. Colette's heart stung at his tone, but she nodded as she understood. "I am Swampfur, the medicine cat. This is Shinyflower, a Queen and Warrior. We are going to continue to ask you questions and you will answer them."

Colette nodded, glancing at Shinyflower. The silver she cat had a beautiful silver coat along with a small white patch, which Colette assumed is why she was named Shinyflower. *Such strange names... Stranger than...*

"Are you associated with the rogue groups led by McNaire or McCallistar?" Swampfur questioned. At this, Coeltte was taken aback and searched frantically for her answer. In a decisive action, she made her choice.

"No," she lied quietly. Expanding on the subject would only panic

the Clan cats.

"Are you a kittypet?"

"No," she replied. "My father was."

"Have you been sick for awhile?" Swampfur asked. Colette shook her head. Drowsy and drenched in sweat, the recent change in her health had just occurred. Worried for the kit's sake, she turned to Shinyflower.

"Can I see.. Furn..star?"

"Fernstar," Shinyflower corrected with a small smile.

"I will speak with her. She must be back at camp, now," Swampfur decided. Halting at the exit, he turned to Shinyflower. "Make sure she doesn't pull anything. Don't hurt yourself."

"I'll be fine," Shinyflower assured him. Seeing Swampfur out, she followed the tom as he scurried up the rocks toward the leader's den. Sighing, she glanced back at Colette.

The she cat's eyes were wide. Shinyflower could not imagine the anxiety the expecting mother must be going through. Turning around, she crossed back toward Colette.

"It will be alright," Shinyflower said with a small smile. Colette's eyes flickered toward her, full of questions and full of wonder.

"I... I heard stories about what they do to she cat rogues," Colette whispered, referring to McNaire and McCallistar.

"It is tragic. I cannot imagine what those she cats live through," Shinyflower muttered with a somber expression. Thinking of Opalshine and Sagepaw made it worse. SkyClan had pronounced them dead, despite the truth behind the matter. Their warriors. Their beloved mother and apprentice were being held against their will while SkyClan did nothing.

Colette nodded, acknowledging the horrors McNaire and McCallistar brought to she cats. However, Colette could perfectly

imagine the tragedies the she cats faced. For Colette had lived them.

"Shinyflower? Is that your name?" Colette asked meekly.

"Yes."

"May I ask you a question?"

"Of course," she replied, stepping nearer to the she cat. Colette lowered her eyes for a moment before continuing.

"The truth is, I know a Warrior from SkyClan. I was wondering, if you knew who he was, or if he still lives here..."

"Yes. I would know. What is his name?" Shinyflower asked curiously.

"Grayfrost," she replied. Like lightning striking, Shinyflower fell back onto her hunches, gazing at the floor. Suddenly, everything came together. The disappearances. The countless times she had to cover for her litter mate. And most of all, the faint scent of rogue on his pelt at night. *Oh Grayfrost.*

Her thoughts took over and Colette's gentle voice was shrouded as she asked. "Do you know him?"

# Chapter 4

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

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Ava- a light tabby she cat.

Jocasta- a Russian blue she cat. Kits: Ned and Gretel

Ned- a young Russian blue tom, only a kitten.

Gretel- a young Russian blue she cat, only a kitten.

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Shinyflower left the Medicine Cat den before she could answer Colette's question. Frantically, she searched for any explanation. Any reason as to why the she cat was bothered. *Where is Grayfrost? She must know him?*

Immediately, Colette grew more anxious and she felt a wave of heat sweep across her. The hot stress was paralyzing her thoughts. However, her panic rushed and raced quickly. Her breaths became abundant and heavy.

Outside the Medicine Cat den, she could hear shouting. Their words were jumbled and it was impossible to distinguish voices.

"Grayfrost is speaking with Fernstar and Swampfur-"

"I need to speak with him! NOW!"

"You can't go in!"

"Yellowbird! Get out of my way!" After the voice shouted her last phrase, a sharp yowl split the air. Colette's breath hitches as she

heard it. She recognized the sound of fighting cats all too well.

"ENOUGH!"

A long silence swept across the clan before quiet orders followed. The screams stopped, but the tension remained thick in the air. Colette tried to rise and edge closer to the exit, but she could not bring forth the strength. The she cat froze as she heard the voices edge near the Medicine Cat den.

Suddenly, Swampfur shot into the den and past Colette's nest into the back stores, were small piles and holes housed various herbs. Sniffing over them he quickly detected the one of his choosing and carefully picked it out. *Spider webs?* Colette could not decipher what Swampfur planned to use them for.

"What happened!" Colette asked with worried eyes. Swampfur glanced faintly at her before turning back to exit. He left Colette in her silent panic.

The next several minutes were excruciating as she waited. Waited for answers. Waited for comfort. Waited for any relief to her pain. Camp was silent.

Her thoughts drifted to McNaire and the other rogues. *What are they doing now that I am gone? Does he know I am gone?* A deep longing rose from within her. She wanted security, order and the comfort of love. *He does not have what you want. He does not love you*. Colette told her self.

Resting her eyes, it was not until late evening when she awoke suddenly. Jolted out of a simple dream, she gazed around, until resting her eyes on the cat before her. Following his large paws up to his eyes, his appearance had not changed. She caught her breath on the sight of his wide blue eyes.

"Colette..."

"Grayfrost!" He stepped back at the sound of her voice. Averting his eyes he had to keep his distance.

"*Colette*," his voice cracked before he continued. "What are you

doing here?"

Grayfrost looked at Colette with disbelief. He thought that their meeting near the twolegplace moons ago would be the last. Yet, now she was here, in SkyClan of all places. He turned back to where she sat.

Colette smiled at finally seeing his face. "Grayfrost, I need your help..."

Grayfrost's eyes slowly travelled across the she cat before they fell on her swollen stomach. His gut twisted. "So it's true. You're pregnant!"

The she cat's expression suddenly turned confused. "Yes, I am."

She did not understand his confusion. She did not understand his emotions at the moment as he clenched his teeth and shut his eyes tightly. Colette could sense the tom's pain, as he tried to lurch away. He wanted to leave the place. He wanted to leave her.

"That's why I need to talk to you, "

"*Colette*, before you say anything-"

"They're your kits!" Colette blurted out at the same time. They both stared at each other. Grayfrost's tail twitched and Colette searched for the right words. "I am sorry I came, I understand isn't right for a rogue to barge in..."

"I have a litter. I have a mate," Grayfrost revealed.

Colette's jaw dropped and her breath left her. She could not breathe. She could not think. Realizing the awkwardness of the situation, it became clear. She was the dirty rogue.

"I'm sorry," Colette croaked. "I had to tell you! I needed to get out of the twolegplace, and they said SkyClan would help! I knew SkyClan would help! It seemed like the safest place, because I thought you would help me..."

Sobbing, doubt began to fill Colette's mind. The SkyClan warriors

she had met before, and the medicine cat and the she cat had shown her much such disdain. All that she had left was her disparate need for sanctuary. Any relief to rid her if her regrets, pains and stupidity. Anything that would relieve her of the horrors she had witnessed. *I don't deserve their help*.

Grayfrost took a deep breath, and sighed. "I understand. We cannot help you."

"Why not?" Colette demanded, fear in her eyes. "Grayfrost, if you just explained to them. That they are your kits-"

"NO!" He immediately erupted with fiery purpose. "*No*, Colette. No one can know. *Promise me*!"

"I..." She stumbled on her words, yet his urgency convinced her. "I promise."

"You do not understand. SkyClan, *my Clan*, had a terrible accident. About seven moons ago, our camp was attacked. Rogues of all kind attacked SkyClan. They killed our elders, our deputies and took two of our she cats. Emerging from the debris of the fight, were two toms. McNaire and McCallistar."

"*McNaire and McCallister*," Colette whispered, heart hammering inside her ribs.

"Do you know them?" Grayfrost asked.

Colette looked away. *He would not understand. He would insist they were McNaire's kits*... "I've heard of their names... I don't know them."

"They are dishonorable toms with no morals," Grayfrost said seriously, forcing himself to continue, despite how pained Colette looked. Suddenly, her thoughts changed.

"What is her name?"

"What?"

"Your mate," Colette muttered

"Her name is Sorrelfoot. She is a great she cat. Noble and filled with Clan honor. Mates are loyal. As a deputy, I have to set an example for the other cats and for my future kin," he explained referring to his kits.

Painfully getting to her paws, Colette turned away from him. "I should just go, *then*. I don't want to cause problems for you, your mate or SkyClan."

"No," he called. Colette narrowed her eyes as his stepped toward her. The air was filled with a different tension. Colette could feel it and watched as Grayfrost struggled for the words. Shaking his head, he looked into her eyes. "I don't want you to leave."

Catching a glimpse of the past, Colette shuddered and averted her eyes. "Why?"

"You are sick, and if you're telling the truth, I want these kits to live. I want to help them. We just have to keep it a secret, for the sake of Sorrelfoot,  SkyClan and my future kits..."

"What about our kits?" Colette asked desperately. At this, Grayfrost froze.

"They will stay here," he finally decided. "They will be born here. They will be raised here. And they will become SkyClan Warriors."

"*Thank you*! Thank you, Grayfrost-"

"You cannot stay," he interjected. "You will raise these kits until they are old enough to part with you. Then, you will live out your years in with a Twoleg, to save you from the rogues."

"I understand," she replied quietly. She yearned to tell him of Opal and Sage. She longed to share the horrors and beg for his help. However, her fears, her wants for her children stopped her. *I will remember you Jocaste... Just not today*.

Suddenly, a voice called out from the center of camp. Grayfrost ran to the den's entrance, and looked out. "Fernstar has called for me.."

"Grayfrost," she muttered. He turned his head slightly, but their eyes

did not meet. "Everything I said that night. It still stands."

"Goodnight Colette."

Leaving the Medicine Cat Den, he headed back toward Fernstar's den, where she sat overlooking the camp. As soon as she spotted Grayfrost, she rose to her paws and entered her den. Trotting up the path, he reached the entrance to her den, taking a deep breath before entering.

"I spoke the the rogue."

"What does she want?"

"Help. She is pregnant and doesn't want to fall under the control of McNaire and McCallistar," he explained calmly. Fernstar furrowed the space between her eyes, and shook her head.

"She smells like them."

"She's not apart of it!"

"She is one of them. I know it," Fernstar replied turning away from the tom. Gritting her teeth, she tried to compose herself. Whipping around and faced him with fiery eyes. "Do not let your feelings get in the way of the Clan's safety..."

"I would never!" He yelled.

"You already have," Fernstar snapped before retreating to her nest. Sitting, she rested her eyes as the many thoughts circulated through her mind. "I have a duty to this Clan. To my kin. And to my sister. Allowing a rogue to live and breed in this Clan is out of the question. Any protection we still have could be thrown away..."

"She does not want to stay. She wants the kits to stay..."

"Who is the father?"

"We have no way of knowing."

"Perhaps," she muttered before coming to her paws. Fernstar had

made her decision. "Leave. Go back to Sorrelfoot and your kits. I will be addressing the Clan, momentarily."

"What are you going to do to her?"

"I thought you vowed your word to do everything in your power to defend this clan from rogues and enemies. You swore this when you became deputy out of your own doing. *Now*, you show inappropriate bias toward a she cat of unknown origins. I am disappointed in you, Grayfrost."

The tom lowered his eyes, yo where he could only see his leader's paws. Quietly, she brushed past him and out of her den to address the clan. Grayfrost remained lowered in submission before cursing himself quietly.

Once again, his emotions and impulsiveness had taken the better of him. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes. He had to focus. He had to become the deputy he wanted to be.

"All cats old enough to climb the ravine, gather below the Rock Pile!" Fernstar shouted out into the midst of the gorge. Slowly, the small clan gathered below the rock pile. Each leaving the safety of their dens and scampering down the rock pile until they reached the base of it.

As gradually all of the clan gathered, Fernstar spotted Grayfrost to be the last that to join them. Gazing over at the nursery, she spotted Shinyflower and Sorrelfoot at the nursery. Reluctant to leave, Fernstar noted to fill them in afterward.

"This afternoon, a rogue by the name of Colette, was found in our territory by Honeypaw. In response she came immediately to her mentor, the right action to do. Unfortunately, the commotion confused many of us. In the meantime, we have learned she is not correlated with the common rogues. Rather, she is looking for sanctuary for her unborn litter and as a merciful Clan, we have agreed. Her litter shall be born, raised and shall die in SkyClan as Warriors of this Clan. After Colette has raised these kits into apprenticeship, she shall return to the twolegplace," Fernstar explained eloquently. Staring down opposition, she could sense the

unrest within her ranks.

Windwhisker gazed down at his paws before sharing concerned looks with Darkgorge. The two toms lowered their heads before returning to their dens. Firfoot looked up at her sister with a cold stare. *All rogues are the same*. Firfoot remembered and scoffed, walking back to the Warrior's den. She was convinced this rogue was no better and she would not treat her or her kits better than what she was.

As the gathering dissembled, Shinyflower glanced around for her brother before tracking him down. Grayfrost was walking down into the gorge, glancing back at Shinyflower to follow. His sister frowned but quickly followed him into the small collection of trees at the bottom of the gorge.

Grayfrost sat quietly beside a tree, careful to hide his expressions from the rest of the Clan. Shinyflower say beside him, doing the same by turning her back to the rock pile. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to contain her anger.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you what?" He replied blankly.

"*You know what*! She spat. His gaze turned cold and his pelt bristled at her tone. "You are disgracing us!"

"Disgracing us?" Grayfrost scoffed before gritting his teeth. Glancing back at the clan, he saw Shrikeclaw at the edge of the Warrior's den, staring back at them. Meeting Shinyflower's eyes, he muttered his reply in a low growl.

"Shrikeclaw and you are the only disgrace. Everyone knows about your relations, who your unborn litter's father is. You brought shame to this family and you should be grateful I am still deputy to give us some honor..."

"Your accusations are in itself disgraceful. How could you say such a thing?" Shinyflower snapped.

"How could you deny this?" Grayfrost cornered. She stood

unmoving and unflinching. He sighed before resting his eyes, and calming his anger. "Silverclaw can never know. No one can know so for our family's sake, keep it quiet."

"You speak as *she* did," Shinyflower said with a sour tone. Referring to their mother, Grayfrost's eyes shut tightly at the memory.

"At least I am not like our father," he retorted. "I love you and Shrikeclaw. But if you try to shame or place blame on my children or myself, I will destroy you."

"Sorrelfoot *knows*."

Grayfrost halted. Uneasy, he shifted his expression before glancing back at Shinyflower. He frowned before he formed a small smirk. "I do not care."

# Chapter 5

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

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**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

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Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 6 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. Expecting kits.

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 2 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 2 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. Newborn.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. Newborn.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. Newborn.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. **Kit**: Thunderkit (tom).

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes. Kits: Messi, Wesley, Madala, and Rose

Messi- a golden furred tom.

Wesley- a black and white furred tom.

Madala- a golden tabby she cat.

Rose- a black she cat with white patches.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes. Kits: Maria and Ava

Maria- a dark furred tortoiseshell she cat.

Ava- a light tabby she cat.

Jocasta- a Russian blue she cat. Kits: Ned and Gretel

Ned- a young Russian blue tom, only a kitten.

Gretel- a young Russian blue she cat, only a kitten.

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"Sandkit," Horsekit squeaked quietly. It was deep in the night and their mother was sleeping in her den with Ryepelt. After the kits had turned two moons, they were weaned off nursing and Fernstar would visit them in the day and before they slept. Although a bit crowded with Sorrelfoot and Shinyflower, it was still as lonely

"Sandkit," he said again, crawling on top of his sister. Nudging her, she stirred slightly and grumbled. "I'm tired.."

"Don't you wanna play?"

"At night? We would wake the queens!"

"Outside the nursery," Horsekit whispered. Sandkit's eyes lit with mischief and she nudged their sister awake. Horsekit shuddered with a giddy heart. Adventure was upon them.
Once they woke Shrewkit, she joined the plan without question. The hardest part however would be sneaking out of the nursery.

Creeping out with soft paws, Sandkit was the first to sneak out successfully. Following her sister, was Shrewkit who had to carefully step over Sorrelfoot's tail. The suspense was excruciating and eventually, it was Horsekit's turn.

"Come on Horsekit!" His sisters whispered from outside the nursery. Their words of encouragement motivated him, pushing him past any prior doubt. Sustaining this courage, he stepped over Sorrelfoot's tail, and slinked around Shinyflower, careful not to touch the queen's pelt.

As he stepped outside, he held for a moment before a wide grin filled the void. Giggling, the kits laughed and snorted as they ran down the rocks. It was tedious and tiring as the huge rocks were exhausting for their little legs. Once they reached the gorge however, the exhaustion and sneaking was well worth the wait.

"We did it!" Sandkit squeaked.

"We should try hunting," Shrewkit suggested. Shaking her head, Sandkit disagreed.

"No! We need to have an adventure! Explore camp!"

"No! We need to hunt!"

"Nuh-uh!"

"Ah-huh!"

"Nuh-uh!"

Horsekit's sisters continued to bicker and banter back and forth before he heard a loud cry. From the forest at the top of the ravine, a loud shriek was heard. Raising their heads, their eyes averted to the top of the ravine where they could only see the moonlight glisten upon the edge.

Yet, they still heard a panicked cry and howls from afar. Thrown into panic, his sisters darted back up the rock, struggling to climb up the difficult path. In their frantic escape, they forgot Horsekit who was still observing the far off sound.

Determined to discover the sound, he followed his sisters up the rocky path. As they ran back into the nursery, Horsekit continued up the ravine's path, heaving himself up rocks and other obstacles. Panting, he passed the warrior's den just as a tom shot out.

Grayfrost, the Clan deputy, ran out of the Warrior's den and down the path before he sat at the base of the creek. The sudden presence sent a shudder through Horsekit, and he backed up into the stone walls of the ravine. Glancing around, he found the rest of the path up the ravine.

Climbing up, Horsekit heaved his heavy belly up the last obstacle before he reaches the dusty top. From the top, he could see everything below, and the thought of falling, made him queasy. Running to a nearby bush, he began to throw up his dinner, when he heard another shriek. This time, it was much closer. Crawling around the tree, he saw nothing.

Shivering, he was about to head back when a voice split the air.

"*Horsekit*!" Whipping around, he faced Firfoot who appeared furious. He winced as the she cat took him back the scruff and headed back toward camp.

"I'm really sorry," he mumbled. Firfoot refrained from mumbling or saying anything until she returned him to outside the nursery safely.

"*Never* do that again, Horsekit. There is a reason kits are not allowed to go everywhere..."

"In really sorry, Firfoot! I was just looking! I wasn't going to get hurt!"

"*Quiet*!" She snapped. Quickly, Horsekit silenced himself and stared at her with wide eyes.

"I will not tell your mother, if you promise not to do that again-"

"I promise," Horsekit replied with a nod. Firfoot gestured for him to go back to bed, and she did the same.

As she walked back toward the Warrior's den, Firfoot noticed Grayfrost pacing back and forth outside the nursery. Frowning, she tried to mind her own business, but the tom seemed worried. Inhaling the air around, her nose wrinkled at the smell. The smell of kitting was in the air, and stress was expected.

Quickly, Firfoot slipped back into the Warrior's den, trying to push away her fears. But her anger was inevitable. *A rogue is giving birth in our camp...*

Inside the nursery, Colette let out a cry of pain. Tensions were high, and although Colette was a healthy she cat, she had been malnourished in her time as a rogue. The sickness and malnourishment had lessened and she grew more healthy during her time in camp.

As he requested, Grayfrost had been notified by Swampfur, when Colette would go into labor. In Grayfrost's hurry, he had accidentally jabbed Darkgorse in the side. The tom grumbled, and Grayfrost had joined Swampfur, inside the medicine cat den. Despite usual tradition, Colette did not kit in the nursery beside the other queens. According to Swampfur, she preferred the solidarity of the medicine cat den.

Grayfrost decided to join Swampfur and Colette inside the Nursery, for she felt most comfortable with his presence. It was not until Swampfur requested, that he was forced to sit outside and wait.

The sounds from inside seemed to taunt him, and waiting soon grew torturous. While Grayfrost paced, Fernstar slipped out of her den. Curiously, she traipsed over to him. She planned to greet the newest member of the Clan, but Grayfrost sparked her interest.

"I thought you hated the anxiety of waiting," Fernstar said, as she approached her deputy.

He jumped slightly, and was a bit taken aback. "I do."

"You seem very concerned for the rogue..."

"She has endured unspeakable horrors, Fernstar," Grayfrost stated

boldly. "For that, she should be given support."

Narrowing her eyes, she held a small grin. Grayfrost always had a way with words.

"Sorrelfoot is your mate. And you have two beautiful kits. Do not feel as though you need to compensate for this rogue's unfortunate life," Fernstar replied.

Grayfrost looked down at his paws. "I understand. I wished to represent our Clan in this matter. Nothing more."

"Then you are right. Welcome our new members for me," Fernstar instructed before heading back toward her den.

Suddenly, the nursery went quiet. Grayfrost rushed inside. Within the nursery, Colette licked her newborn kit clean. There was a single kit. A tom, with gray tabby fur, unusually large for a newborn.

"Congratulations," Swampfur meowed quietly. "Do you know what you want-"

"Colette!" Grayfrost sat beside the white rogue, his blue eyes wide. At the sudden exuberant time, Swampfur recoiled and felt the sudden awkwardness of the situation.

"Take some Borage leaves, and poppy seeds when you're ready to sleep. I will go get some water," Swampfur announced before he exited the den. Glancing at her, Swampfur hoped it would not morph into something dangerous to the health of the Clan.

As Grayfrost gazed upon Colette, the she cat was staring down at Thunderkit with immense pride, compassion and love in her eyes. She was glowing, more than any other queen. It was a truly beautiful sight.

Colette looked at Grayfrost and blushed. "I think I'll name him Thunderkit.."

Thunderkit nuzzled against Colette and began to suckle. Grayfrost nodded, also smiling in pride. "A good, strong name."

Suddenly, Colette's eyes averted to the exit of the den. Grayfrost followed her panicked gaze until he met the source with his own eyes.

Her pale green eyes were lost. Full of pain. "Sorrelfoot..."

Sorrelfoot looked away before explaining. "I was coming to offer my assistance to the new mother... But I can see, she already has enough of that."

Before Grayfrost could make an utterance, Sorrelfoot darted out of the nursery. Grayfrost followed. Colette watched them leave, drowning in guilt. Yet, sour and saddened at the fact the father of her kits, left her. It will be gone soon. SkyClan and McNaire would fade into her past.

"Sorrelfoot, please, let me explain!" Grayfrost whispered with a strained voice. Sorrelfoot down the gorge and toward the edge of camp. "Stop! I can explain!"

Sorrelfoot whirled around, her face pained. "I wish you would! Please explain what you are doing with a rogue whore!"

"I was representing the Clan!"

"Stop lying," Sorrelfoot hissed. "I have had enough. I want the truth, now, or our children, will not know their father!"

"*I love you...*"

"You were not there for them. But you were there for her! She gives that kit your father's father's name! And you continue to lie to me!" Sorrelfoot screamed. Grayfrost tried to near her, tried to calm the she cat but she retaliated in a hiss.

Grayfrost fell back with narrowed eyes. His jaw was clenched, and his brow furrowed. *She has no faith in me. No trust.*

"You want the truth," he gritted. "I was looking for Sagepaw."

Sorrelfoot's eyes softened. "*Sagepaw*?"

He nodded. "Amongst the twolegplace. At the time, it was forbidden. At the time, I was determined to become the next deputy."

"Of course. It was apart of the plan," Sorrelfoot reminded him.

"I met Colette there. She had information and as you can see, she had beauty," he stated before frowning. "We were depressed. I blamed myself for Sagepaw... Colette was there when I needed comfort and a reminder to return to Clan. *My destiny*. I never went back. Never left you since."

Sorrelfoot had suspected as much, and now her fears were confirmed. "If she had not been taken, would she still mean nothing to you?"

Grayfrost looked Sorrelfoot in the eye. "She has never meant anything."

"Is that kit yours?"

"Yes," Grayfrost revealed. "And he is *my son*. And you will treat him as such."

Sorrelfoot recalled Fernstar's decision to SkyClan earlier. Colette would be leaving as soon as her kit could eat prey. However, the kit would be staying, to become a warrior. Her chest burned and her hopes and dreams for their life, disappeared.

Crying, she realized the cold truth. Nothing was going right. She thought that so many things would go differently. Nothing was going as planned, and for that, she held a cold fear and disdain. All she held onto, was the hope that as soon as Colette was gone, things would return to the way they should be.

"I will see you tomorrow," Sorrelfoot said coldly, before trotting back up the gorge. Returning to the nursery, she never looked back.

Grayfrost watched her leave, and he tried to relate to her worries. *What would this mean for Larkkit and Sparrowkit?* He could not see the wrong. He felt pride for his children, especially Thunderkit. Grayfrost could not see the harm in his love for his son.

Suddenly, he snapped at the notion. He shook these thoughts from his mind. They were poison. Having feelings for his illegitimate son would not help SkyClan, or Sorrelfoot. If he wanted to help SkyClan, he would continue his duties at Deputy and be father to his legitimate children, and mate to the she cat he had chosen.

Grayfrost made his choice. He would go back to the Warrior's Den, go on the hunting patrol tomorrow, volunteer for patrol, and complete any tasks that would keep his priorities straight.

Fernstar watched from the entrance of her den as Grayfrost crept back into the Warrior's Den. When everything was quiet, and as it should be, she turned and went to join her mate in their nests. However, few cats in SkyClan, would be sleeping.

# Chapter 6

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 7.5 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. Expecting kits.

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 3.5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 3.5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 3.5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 1.5 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 1 moon.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. Kit: Thunderkit (tom)

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes. Kits: Messi, Wesley, Madala, and Rose

Messi- a golden furred tom.

Wesley- a black and white furred tom.

Madala- a golden tabby she cat.

Rose- a black she cat with white patches.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes. Kits: Maria and Ava

Maria- a dark furred tortoiseshell she cat.

Ava- a light tabby she cat.

Jocasta- a Russian blue she cat. Kits: Ned and Gretel

Ned- a young Russian blue tom, only a kitten.

Gretel- a young Russian blue she cat, only a kitten.

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The disturbance occurred in her sleep. The wind shook the structure of the barn and howled outside as the mothers, kits and rogues tried to sleep. At the unusual sounds, Ava began crying, and it did not cease.

"Mommy," she mumbled. Sage closed her eyes, ignoring the kit. Pulling the kit closer to her belly, the kit began to produce softer cries until she fell back asleep. When it seemed Ava had drifted into sleep, a loud pitched howl was cast throughout the barn.

Suddenly, McNaire came into the barn, eyes ablaze and fur on its end. Behind him, were his sons, who were allowed to keep order as long as their allegiance fell to their father. His yellow eyes scanned the crowd of she cats before he detected Sage.

Immediately, she knew she was in trouble.

"It has been a moon," he declared. Sage frowned.

"What?" As the words slipped from her mouth, he raked his claws down her muzzle. At this, she could only yelp in pain as his claws severed her flesh.

"Colette has been gone for a moon. And I know... *Nothing*!"

"It has been a moon and a half," Sage corrected under her breath. McNaire's eyes narrowed.

"What did you say?"

"It has been a moon and a half," she replied quietly.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know!" Sage insisted.

"You must certainly know if you know when she left," McNaire cornered her and she found it hard to think clearly. Holding her tongue, she made no other dispute except for her final answer.

"I had no part of it. I do not know where she is and I would never condone she run off swollen and pregnant," Sage retorted before glaring up at McNaire. Stepping back he sat with discomfort, and the neighboring she cats watched in awe.

An escape was uncommon and McNaire never put his personal time or emotion into missing she cats. By routine, he sent his sons out for inspection of the area and new she cats as well as old ones. But McNaire never made a habit of committing himself to hunting down a she cat after a moon of no appearance.

"Do you think she ran off for the clans?" McNaire questioned boldly, taking Sage by surprise. Coldly, she gave her reply.

"No."

"It is the only place we have not searched," McNaire stated. "And a rogue like her, would never wander out into the unknown..."

"You do not know her. You do not know SkyClan," Sage retorted, with a clear purpose. Inducing fear might send McNaire off his hunt

and bring him back to reality.

"I know *my she cats*," he muttered with a sinister smirk. "And I believe she went there. *You*, will tell us where that place is."

"Why not do what you did before? Why not ask Opal?"

"I don't want to ask Opal. I want *you*, to tell me. Can you tell me Sage?" McNaire whispered with narrowed eyes. Taking a breath, she replied in a monotone voice.

"No."

"You will."

"No."

"Shall I strike you again?" McNaire threatened. Sage closed her eyes and turned her head, so that he may have a portion of her face to strike. Exposing her face, she made a bold statement which sent terror through McNaire. "Shall I strike your kit?"

Sage suddenly turned to face him, eyes wide with horror. *He wouldn't*, she immediately thought. Then forming her conclusion, remembered how he showed no care or mercy. *He would.* As Ava watched in horror, she hoped her daughter would not interpret this as a sign of hatred, but an act of bravery.

"Kill her," Sage permitted, whilst turning away. McNaire suddenly lunged at Sage and pinned her to the ground. As she squirmed violently, his breath reeked above her as he murmured his response.

"You will no longer cooperate, so neither will I. Ava will join her sister and McCallistar," he stated giving a nod to one of his sons. The tom took Ava by the scruff and took her away, out of the barn to never be seen again. "I will inform Opal how you resisted, and as for punishment, her kits will be leaving also."

Sage panicked at the thought. Opal loved her kits, and if anything happened, would surely suffer greatly. *You cannot...* Sage stopped herself. Her hopes were fleeting. Her dreams would die. And what was left? *You cannot help her. You cannot help yourself*.

"Good luck," Sage muttered heavily. McNaire's glare stayed on the she cat for some time before shifting to where Opal resided with her kits. Traipsing over, he wasted no time.

Prying the tom kits from their mother, panic erupted, and Opal tried to save her kits. Clawing and fighting in every way she knew how, the sons of McNaire held her back as McNaire examined the two tom kits. Staring coldly at Opal, he grew impatient.

"The location of SkyClan, *please*."

"Please! McNaire! Don't do this! They're our sons!" Opal pleaded feverishly, as she struggled from the cats holding her back. Painfully, she watched as McNaire rested his paw on the head of Wesley, one of her tom kits. The kit immediately began to cry out as McNaire examined him with malicious eyes.

"Where?"

"*Please*!"

"Sage," he called out. The she cat glanced over, but uttered no word. "Watch as I kill him. Watch as I kill every tom kit in this barn."

Screams erupted as this occurred and Sage shot toward McNaire, tiny in comparison to his large size. Eyes fiery with anger and dread, she spat at his paws before returning to her nest.

The action was beyond his expectations. McNaire did not realize Sage was capable of such mutiny. Immediately, he decided, he had to be expelled. An expulsion was called for. Pushing her out of the barn, he threw her to the floor of the outdoor grass. Soft and covered in dew, it had been long since her paws relinquished at the feeling as grass.

However, she could not savor the air or her surroundings, for McNaire lashed his tail. Fire seemed to emit from his yellow eyes and he growled in frustration. "You will be sent to McCallistar, and you will obey my brother. I will continue to kill all the tom kits in that barn for they belong to me. And now you, belong to McCallistar. *Get gone*."

As McNaire left her and returned to the barn, his sons seemed to dissolve into the shadows of the barn. Disappearing, Sage was alone. Dropping to the grass, she breathed heavily as she began to cry in disbelief. *I am free. Free of that monster*.

Sage shuddered as loud cries and shrieks erupted from the barn. An never ending chorus of screams and terror came from the structure. Any passer by might ask what would do such a thing? A fox? Or a badger? But the answer was horrific. A father murdered his own sons, in front of their feeble and weak mothers.

Realizing the extent of her own words, she grew weak inside. *Have I traded their lives? For what?* She shook those thoughts. *For SkyClan*.

"Come with me," a voice bellowed in the shadows. Turning around, she faced a pair of yellow eyes, identical to McNaire's. Stepping back, she backed away as a large tom stepped closer and more into her view. Exposing his appearance, the black furred tom observed her in silence.

"Come with me," he repeated. She followed the time wearily, until he lead her away from the main barn. Following the tom toward a twoleg den, they did not speak until they came before a small hole in the side of the structure. "You will sleep here. Hunting opportunities are abundant in the area. Just be careful of dogs."

Before the tom disappeared, Sage was moved to curiosity. She blurted out, "what is your name?"

The tom looked at his paws, and walked away. "McCallistar."

As the rays of dawn cascaded over the ravine, the SkyClan camp began to bustle and work with vigor. With more mouths to feed, and more on the way, hunters were pressed to bring in plentiful prey. Although it was moons before leaf-bare would come upon them, Fernstar kept her Clan fully prepared for it.

Across large stones lay below the ravine and up until the gorge. The abundance of rocks prevented the grassy base of the gorge from encroaching up the ravine, and prevented saplings and flowers from sprouting. However, other means of life found their home amongst

the stones.

The cats shared the ravine with snakes and lizards, which took haven in the tiny crevices within. Every moon, a snake would be sited and the Medicine Cat would increase their stock of herbs, in case of the event. Only myths told of death by a serpent. Any SkyClan cat who had been bitten by a snake, could never tell of the tale.

The threat of being bitten, never disturbed the SkyClan elders. Waiting for their time to pass, a snake bite would be a more memorable and honorable death than dying of old age. At their many moons, being remembered was more important than peace. The elders were left to place tension upon their adult offspring, in hopes they would live again, through their legacy.

Upon the stones, the elders shuddered at the cool touch. They momentarily lifted their paws, as they waited in anticipation for the great green-lead moment. As the powerful sun began to glide over the ravine, the elders basked in the warmth of the light, taking great comfort in it.

"Ah," Silverclaw sighed. Beside him, Sunnystripe cackled in laughter.

"You three are ancient! You cannot withstand the cold of the night, despite your great names!"

"I am afraid, you are mistaken, Sunnystripe," Gingertail replied with a high nose. *What pride he has is wasted*.

"You shiver at the cold..."

"All cats shiver at the cold," Silverclaw remarked with a smirk. "It is truly what you do in the cold, that matters."

"What does that mean?"

"Why would one waste their time in the unpleasant nature of the cold?" Silverclaw challenged. "Only for a good purpose, I presume."

"You are-"

"Go away!" Risingsun croaked. Sunnystripe followed his suggestion and walked off, wobbling down the stones in his blindness. Meanwhile, Gingertail glanced over to Risingsun.

"You should really speak to Swampfur about that," she said. The old tom shook his head defiantly, so Gingertail rose to her paws.

"I will fetch Swampfur," she announced with a smug expression. Risingsun grumbled as she began to search for the medicine cat.

Tree-lengths away, Sorrelfoot resided outside the medicine cat den while her two kits played beside her, suckling. As they fed, she enjoyed a plump squirrel, one that she had chosen from the prey pile. Although Grayfrost offered his rabbit to her, she chose the squirrel to spite Grayfrost. The quarrel had been caught by her brother, Windwhisker. When she declined the rabbit, Grayfrost boldly offered the piece of prey to Colette, who accepted it great fully.

Thinking about it now, Sorrelfoot cringed at the way she handled it. *You should've just taken the rabbit.* She told herself over and over again. But something in her gut, some internal alarm told her, her decision was correct.

"Sorr... Sorrel... Sorrelfoot," Sparrowkit squeaked quietly.

"Yes, Sparrowkit," she answered with a small smile. Her son thought of his words than replied.

"Where did the white cat come from?"

"You mean," Sorrelfoot paused. "Colette."

"Yeah," Larkkit added on. The kits listened carefully as she tried to formulate the right words.

"Colette... Colette is a rogue."

"What's a rogue?"

"A rogue is a cat who is not a warrior and not a kittypet. They don't really belong anywhere," Sorrelfoot replied. Larkkit gasped while

Sparrowkit pressured her for answers.

"*Why*?"

"Because," Sorrelfoot said. Thinking back to when she was a kit, she repeated the same words her father had said. "Because rogues are not like us. They can never be true Warriors."

"Oh," Sparrowkit said, thinking about the statement. As he did this, a scream across camp erupted.

Sorrelfoot stood up immediately, and her kits burrowed beneath her in alarm. Down the path, Swampfur raced to Colette who screamed and grabbed Thunderkit by the scruff. Feverish, something appeared to be wrong with the Queen, or what lay at her paws.

As Swampfur made it to the she cat's side, he inspected the issue. On the rock path, lay the rabbit that Grayfrost had given her. A single bite had been taken but within, was a shocking revelation. From the small hole, Swampfur observed many maggots crawling within the flesh and out of the rabbit. The insects crept across the prey and stone, bringing disease and an omen of death.

Swampfur fell back at the shock and beside him, Gingertail gasped. Narrowing her eyes, she looked toward Colette.

"Who gave you that!" The elder demanded.

"Grayfrost! It didn't look bad-"

"*You*! You are poison!" Gingertail declared before conversing with Swampfur to the side. "You must know what this means!"

"I know what this means," Swampfur spat, eyes still caught on the prey. Gingertail's eyes widened and she looked past him, at the terrified Colette.

"Do what you must," Gingertail whispered before leaving the path. Racing back to her fellow elders, Gingertail had left but still played out in Colette's mind.

*I am poison?* Colette shuddered at the thought. Realizing she should

explain the matter to Thunderkit, she took him away from the maggot infested rabbit before placing him down. With wide teary eyes, her kit remained silent.

"It's alright," she whispered in a motherly tone. His gray fur puffed out, enlarging his appearance and giving him a sense of security. "The rabbit was icky, so mommy couldn't eat it. The others got scared. It's okay."

Thunderkit nodded, too young to really understand it completely. He yawned and looked at his mother . "You wanna go to bed?"

"T..te... Tell-"

"A story?" Colette smiled, as Thunderkit nodded vigorously.

"Once, there lived a little white she cat..."

# Chapter 7

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 7.5 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 3.5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 3.5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 3.5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 1.5 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 1 moon.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. Newborn.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. Newborn.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. Newborn.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. Kit: Thunderkit (tom)

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes. Kits: Madala, and Rose

Madala- a golden tabby she cat.

Rose- a black she cat with white patches.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Jocasta- a Russian blue she cat. Kits: Ned and Gretel

Ned- a young Russian blue tom, only a kitten.

Gretel- a young Russian blue she cat, only a kitten.

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"Where are we going!"

"Be quiet," Jocasta whispered to Gretel, who whined beside her. Keeping up with her mother was a tiring task, but her mother insisted Ned must be carried. Ned came first.

Slinking through the night, the daunting task was before the mother. Her silvery pelt glistened under the moon. Blue and radiant, her eyes glazed over the streets, looking for any sign of life.

"Gretel," she whispered. Glancing to her right flank, the young kit was straggling but came to her mother's side gradually. Her heavy breathing bothered her mother, and Jocasta made a decision. Setting down, Ned, she glanced over the two. "Gretel I will carry you for a few more paces. Ned, run with me. Keep up sweetheart."

"Yes mother," Ned replied getting a head start. Picking up Gretel, Jocasta caught up with her son and they dashed down the twoleg street, in the midst of the shadows. Although in the realm of

twolegs, the streets were not as lit as usual. The only light emitted came from the twoleg dens.

Jocasta retraced the path in her mind, glancing over the dens. *Tall and narrow. Shrubs with sharp edges.* Inspecting each one was hard enough with the kits, but differentiating between them was another challenge. Suddenly, a sharp and shocking bark erupted from one of the houses. Her eyes darted to the noise and she froze.

Across the street, a dog barked and cackles from within the twoleg den. It would not stop and sat and howled at the window for many moments, until the lights of the house were flicked on. In a sequence of events, several houses' lights went on and Jocasta glanced to the kits. Taking sudden action, she ushered them toward a nearby bush made of long tall grasses. Within she placed Gretel down beside Ned, and looked at the two.

"I am looking for the safe den. I will be right back. *Don't move*," Jocasta said sternly before leaving the brother and sister to comfort themselves. Together, they sat in the center of the bush huddled in a quiet sense of terror. The experience was too stressful, too dangerous to be excited about.

Glancing at his sister, Ned began to whisper. "It'll be alright."

"What if mommy gets lost-"

"She's smart," Ned assured her, although frightened himself. His sister's blue eyes began to grow smaller as she grew calmer. Ned look at his dark gray paws and looked to Gretel.

"You think I'll be blue some day, like mommy?"

"Sure Ned! It comes with smarts," she chuckled referring to herself. Ned jabbed her with his paw gently before they resumed their silent wait. Both kits were happy that Jocasta had taken them away from the barn. It was far too crowded and she had told them something bad was going to happen. Jocasta only told them that McNaire might take one of them away.

Ned and Gretel only knew that McNaire took away the bad kittens.

Kittens he did not like or kittens that misbehaved. If Gretel and Ned got along, let their mother groom them regularly, and stayed healthy, Jocasta told them they would always be together. Gretel always felt bad when the other kits were taken away. Often, she would be awake for those incidents while Ned slept through them.

"Ned.."

"Hmm?"

"I am happy we are in this bush. I didn't like the barn," Gretel whispered.

"Me too," Ned replied in a hushed tone.

"I love you Ned. I'm sorry I sat on you yesterday," Gretel whispered.

"It's alright-" Ned was cut off when a loud yowl shot through the air. A chorus of cackles continued and both the kits quieted themselves in fear of the noise. Their minds were filled with worry for their mother.

A chill travelled down Ned's spine, although it was not a cold night. He leaked out of the bushes and caught a glimpse a figures coming down the street. At least three large figures. Panic shot through the two and they remained low.

From behind them, Jocasta appeared and surprised the two. "Stay here. Do not move, *whatever happens*."

Before the kits could reply, Jocasta darted around the bush and into the street. Racing down the street toward the figures, to keep them from nearing the kits. Jocasta confronted McNaire head on, without any words.

"Where are they?"

"*Dead*. You killed them," Jocasta gritted through her teeth.

"Nice try, but I know your kits..."

"You are disgusting. And despite what you do, everyone, including

your own brother, will always hate you," Jocasta muttered with disdain as two tons covered the unguarded spots around her. McNaire narrowed his eyes and sneered.

"Tell me something I don't know." Before she could react, the two toms, only pawns of McNaire, took her down, pinning her to the street. Jocasta grunted and scrambled in an attempt to free herself, as McNaire chuckled.

Within the bush, Ned shuddered and Gretel panicked. Darting forward, Gretel blindly raced toward the enemy screaming her pleas.

"No! Don't hurt her!" Gretel cried out. The attackers and McNaire all looked up in surprise to see Gretel racing toward them. McNaire gave Jocasta a small grin which only caused the queen to struggle more.

"Come here," McNaire ordered. The kit bounded toward her mother with wide eyes. Before she could reach her mother, McNaire took her by the scruff and walked a few paces away.

Crying out, Jocasta's cries reaches not only the dogs, but the twoleg inhabitants of the dens. McNaire held a blank expression as he dropped Gretel to the ground and brought his humungous claws upon her. Slashing her, it was lethal as he faked his claws from her flank to her neck and eventually her face. Gretel screamed feebly before falling into the street.

Ned remained frozen in utter horror as he heard the events take place. Although he was moved to action within, his body would not move. Shuddering from the fright, he looked away searching for relief. Feverishly his eyes continued to scan the bush as his head spun in circles. The faint scream of his mother erupted. Then, the night went silent.

Breaking the silence, a dog shot out of its den and into the street. McNaire and his goonies raced off, chased by the mutt. As this occurred, a twoleg's shouts were heard before it walked off its lawn and into the street. Glancing down at Jocasta and Gretel, the twoleg seemed to let out a cry of sorrow before leaning down.

Ned remained within the security of the tall shrub, eyeing the twoleg from afar. Meowing, he called for his mother wearily. *Maybe she's alright...*

Rather, the twoleg turned its glance toward the bush and slowly walked over. Ned shut his eyes as the twoleg bent over the bush. Gently, the twoleg's paws wrapped around him and he was picked up and pressed closely to its chest. Remaining still, Ned did not dare to move and risk being eaten by the beast. But despite his fears, he was not harmed, but carried back across the lawn and to the entrance of the den.

Catching only glimpses of what laid behind him, his mother and sister lay lifeless about the street. McNaire was nowhere to be seen, but Ned knew, he could never leave the den. *I'll see you again, mommy. But first, I have to see McNaire. When I'm bigger than him...*

As silence fell upon the street once again, the sky slowly began to lighten. At the bottom of the gorge, the queen slowly limped over to nearby creek.

Staring at her reflection in the still puddle, she was surprised at how tired she appeared. Her eyes were droopy and her paws were sore. The recent kitting had taken all of her energy, and more. Groggy, her mind felt numb and she barely felt the chill of the puddle. Bending down, she lowered her lips to the pool where she lapped up water. When she was satisfied, she reached the edge of the creek and dipped the tip of her tail in.

Gradually, Shinyflower had groomed and cleaned her pelt to her pleasing. The blood and other substances of the kitting had been washed away by the creek. Refreshed, she turned to head back toward the Nursery. To her surprise she was confronted by an unlikely face.

"Hello Darkgorge," she said cordially, although her father did not return the mannerism. Instead he examined his surroundings, and appeared quite distant to Shinyflower.

"Tell me about the kits," he said suddenly, just as she was heading away. Stopping she replied.

"Three kits. Two she cats and a tom. Turtlekit, Swallowkit and Blackkit," she informed him. Continuing her optimistic tone she said, "You should stop by later today."

"Are they pure?"

"What do you mean?" Shinyflower scoffed.

"Who is the father?" Darkgorge challenged.

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Answer the question, Shinyflower."

"You have no right," she gritted between her fangs. Darkgorge whipped his eyes to face her in a glare. Taking strides toward her, she could see his nostrils flare and his eye ablaze.

"I have every right," he spat. Scoffing he maintained his glare of disgust. "If I find out it was a yellow pelted mongrel, you better hope those kits know where to run-"

"*They are pure*," she snapped. Staring back into her father's soulless eyes, she maintained the glare. Standing whiskers apart, it was a stand off meant to exhibit the primal power within the Warrior. Darkgorge was the one to back off, and he scowled before stalking away.

Despite putting her father in his place, Shinyflower feared she had revealed too much to him. Darkgorge lavished in being a pure blooded Warrior, and carried an ancient tradition of worrying about the color of his descendant's pelts. For Shinyflower, she found her father to be a disgrace. Her brothers, on the other hand, would uphold his traditions at any cost. Grayfrost did. Shrikeclaw did.

Putting the sick thought to rest, Shinyflower traipsed back up toward the nursery. Returning to her newborn kits, sleeping beside a white furred rogue.

# Chapter 8

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 8.5 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 4.5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 4.5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 4.5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 2.5 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 1 moon.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 1 moon.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 1 moon.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

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Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes. Kits: Madala, and Rose

Madala- a golden tabby she cat.

Rose- a black she cat with white patches.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 5 moons old.

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"Then!" Honeypaw gasped. "The Warrior vanished! His name, forever known as *Losthowl*... For his calls for help rang throughout the forbidden forest for the rest of the moons... Until the end of time!"

"No way!" Sandkit smirked.

"Oh yeah," Honeypaw chuckled. "When you become an apprentice, you will hear his voice. It howls... *Help me! Help me*!"

"Maybe you're just *crazy*," Larkkit said with a small grin. The tuft of fur upon her chest puffed out.

"Nah!"

"Are you sure? You're telling Elder stories instead of teaching us a new game," Sparrowkit challenged boldly. Honeypaw narrowed her eyes, staring at the far too many, and challenging, batch of kits.

"When you become *mature* apprentices, like me, history will become important to you. More than just silly games..."

"Nuh-uh!" Larkkit said.

"Uh-huh!"

"NUH-UH! My mother says that playing games are beneficial to our growth and we may be apprentices sooner than later. Besides, it shows off our talent to Fernstar," Larkkit corrected Honeypaw with a superior expression. Honeypaw frowned.

"Sorrelfoot is way too serious. Take my advice and let loose, Larkkit!"

"Make me!"

"Fine. Cat and Mouse in 5... 4... 3... 2-"

"Whose the mouse!"

"Um... All the kits except Sandkit and myself! Go!"

As the chorus of shouts and cheers erupted from the game of Cat and Mouse, Thunderkit observed quietly from afar. Splayed across a nice stone, he watched intently as Honeypaw chased Larkkit back and forth. However Larkkit was clever within the game, maneuvering so that she put the other kits before herself. Honeypaw would have been unwise to deny the opportunity to get Sparrowkit. As soon as Sparrowkit was touched by Honeypaw's paw, he became a "cat" and together they would chase after the "mice."

Even better, was the sight to see as Horsekit and Shrewkit ran from their sister Sandkit, who was the largest of the three litter mates and first born. Sandkit always seemed to cut them off with her speed. It wasn't long before Sandkit caught Horsekit by sitting on top of her brother. The litter mate's laughter could be heard all across the camp.

Sighing, Thunderkit lifted himself off the rock and headed toward Colette, who was inside the nursery, as usual. Overtime, Thunderkit came to learn that his mother did not do much around camp. Colette did not say much to anyone, except him and occasionally pleasant talk with Shinyflower.

Colette slept the time away, or stared off into the forest. And as

Thunderkit grew older and bigger, Colette was more and more reluctant to play with him. Entering the den, he stopped before his mother, looking at her with wide yellow eyes.

"Thunderkit?" She said abruptly. "Is something wrong?"

"Um... It's just... Can you play with me?" Thunderkit asked awkwardly, shifting on his paws. He glanced quickly at the three kits beside Shinyflower, who were being nurses at the moment.

"Thunderkit," she sighed. "I would love to... But... You're big kit now. You have to play with cats your own size. You know... *make friends*-"

"I'm Thunderkit's friend!" Blackkit declared with a proud smirk. His sister wriggled away and shared the same thoughts.

"Me too!" Swallowkit smiled.

"That's awful sweet of you three," Colette replied sharing a warm smile with Shinyflower.

"But..."

"Just go outside Thunderkit. They are all nice kits... I'm sure you can play with them," Shinyflower encouraged. Colette silently thanked the other mother and Thunderkit groggily limped out of the den.

Following the path down, he eventually reached the kits at a flat area near the gorge. When he reached the area, the other kits did not seem to notice and continued on with their game. After a few moments, Thunderkit felt the need to speak up.

"Um... Can I play with you?" At first, no one heard his question and only Sandkit shared a quick glance toward the tom kit before continuing her preoccupation.

"Can I play with you?" He repeated, a little bit louder. Suddenly, the others stopped and all eyes were on him. Silent and full of surprise, all the kits were frozen as they inspected Thunderkit. *Do I looks weird?* He thought to himself. *Maybe I should have had Colette bathe*

*me...*

"What did he say?" One of the kits whispered.

"You can play with us, Thunderkit!" Honeypaw said with a smile before turning to the others. "Alright guys. Now Sparrowkit and Horsekit will be the cats. And the rest of us are the mice. This time, you have to hide first!"

"No speaking!" Larkkit shouted at her brother. Sparrowkit sent a mischievous smirk toward his sister before he turned around. Horsekit did the same, and the game commenced. .

Thunderkit's paws tingled with excitement as he saw the other kits race off to hide. Slow to understand, Thunderkit did not have too much time to determine where to hide. As time slipped away, he began searching frantically for a hiding spot. Ducking behind a rock, his eyes just glanced over the rock, so that he could see the cats approaching.

His heart thudded within his chest and Thunderkit smiled. *I wonder if mice really feel this way...*

"I'm coming!" Sparrowkit announced as he bounded off to find the others. Closest to the gorge, Thunderkit crouched down further in panic when he realized Sparrowkit was nearing him. The excitement rushed through him and as Sparrowkit and his eyes met, Thunderkit raced away. Smiling from ear to ear, he could barely contain himself as his heart pounded. *He's on your tail! Run! Run!* Up the rocks, he climbed and bounded until he mounted a large rock amongst the rock pile.

Panting, he turned around to expect Sparrowkit on his tail, but the tom was still down at the gorge. Frowning, he examined the status of the game more closely. Horsekit had found Shrewkit and Larkkit hiding along the path to the leader's den. Sparrowkit and Horsekit chased those two until Horsekit tripped. Picking himself up, Horsekit realized that Honeypaw had tripped him. Chasing after the she cat, he tried to revenge his numb cheek. Together, the others laughed as Horsekit continually missed them and as Sparrowkit caught Shrewkit with a triumphant shout.

Together they chased amongst the rocks and raced pass Thunderkit several times. Joining the others, he bounded down the path and laughed as he saw Sparrowkit and Shrewkit chase Larkkit past him, and down the gorge. Horsekit raced passed him, along with the others. His smile soon fell as his continual attempts to catch up with group and participate, ended in the group shifting to other places. Numerous times, the "cats" had passed Thunderkit and did nothing.

When Sandpaw was caught, he began to lose self confidence. Even with only three more cats as mice, no cat had attempted to catch Thunderkit. *Do they not see me?*

"Hey!" He was compelled to shout. No kit turned their head. Not even Honeypaw paid any attention to him.

Racing toward the group again he placed himself in front of Sparrowkit, only to be passed again. When Larkkit was caught, he knew something was wrong. *What are they doing?*

"Get Honeypaw!" They all shouted as they chased the she cat throughout camp. Together, they bounded over the rocks and a few kits tripped and fell. Thunderkit felt his heart drop as they all tackled Honeypaw. The kits cheered as they tackled the apprentice.

When they finally dissembled, Larkkit stood and shook the dust off her pelt. "What game should we play now?"

"Winner gets to decide, remember," Sandkit sasses, staring up at Honeypaw. *Wait... I'm the winner...*

From the bottom of Thunderkit's belly, he felt a spark and a fire develop through him. The horrid feeling spread to the rest of his body as the other kits suggested other games A few of them congratulated Honeypaw without even glancing back at Thunderkit. *What is this?*

Out of nowhere, Thunderkit was jabbed from behind and a sharp laughter followed it. Whipping around, Thunderkit met the yellow eyes of Horsekit.

"Gotcha!" He laughed. Thunderkit's sudden build up of emotion was

released in a laugh. Still, he wanted answers. Turning away from Horsekit he turned toward the others as they travelled down to the gorge. "Hey!"

Thunderkit's shout caught the attention of Sparrowkit and Shrewkit who turned to face him. As soon as he had their attention, he challenged the two. "Why were you ignoring me!"

"What?" Shrewkit laughed.

"Nobody was chasing me!"

"Horsekit just got you," Larkkit suddenly cornered. Thunderkit frowned. *She knew exactly what everyone was doing...*

"Nobody was even playing with me until then! You were all ignoring me!" Thunderkit accused with narrowed eyes. Sparrowkit scoffed and looked over Thunderkit.

"You don't need to be a sore-loser, Thunderkit. Next time, maybe if you kept up with the group and didn't just hide the whole time..."

"What! I didn't," Thunderkit snapped. "I won! You guys never caught me-"

"Honeypaw won?" Shrewkit muttered in confusion. Glancing over to Honeypaw, the apprentice shifted awkwardly, while glancing toward the Warrior's den. Up camp, Yellowbird waited anxiously for her apprentice.

"I gotta go meet Yellowbird," Honeypaw announced. The focus changed. The other kits sighed and followed the apprentice. As the others left, Thunderkit was left enthralled in confused tensions. He built his emotions up for nothing. If he confronted them again, they would only ignore him.

As they were out of ear, Horsekit moved to face Thunderkit. Sharing a sympathetic glance, he sighed. After a moment of thought, Horsekit decided he did not want to make excuses for the other kits. *Make it better*. Looking up at the gray tabby tom, he smiled.

"Would you like me to show you around camp? I know you have been out but I don't think you've been shown *everything*. And it's important! I love our camp," Horsekit rambled on and Thunderkit nodded. The thought was pleasant, but the anger and disdain for the game still boiled within him.

"Sure! But.."

"What is it?" Horsekit asked.

"Why do they... Why do they not like me?" Thunderkit asked uneasily, terribly confused.

"I like you. I am sure in time, they will like you too," Horsekit said before his eyes lit in excitement. Gesturing for Thunderkit to follow, Horsekit ran up the path. "Over here, is the Leader's den. If you didn't know, Fernstar is the leader of SkyClan right now and she will be until she dies. She's my mom, by the way. Ryepelt is my dad."

"That's cool," Thunderkit remarked. At the mere thought, Thunderkit could not recall his father. "I don't have a father."

"What? Everyone has a father, and a mother. I am sure you have one!" Horsekit said with a slight chuckle. "The highest den is the Warrior's den, just up path from the Elder's den and Nursery."

"This is a stupid questions but what are elders? Why don't they do stuff?" Thunderkit had wondered it for some time now. He had never directly spoken with an elder. Every time he neared an elder, they gave him funny looks or frowns.

"They're too old. So we give them den and food for good measure and to honor their good deeds," Horsekit said. It seemed to make sense, but Thunderkit still did not understand them.

"What's up there? Up the path?"

"That's outside of the camp. It's our upper territory, where there is a wide field and a forest. Nowadays though, most patrols hunt along the gorge and to the lower territory, because it's safer-"

"What's not safe?" Thunderkit challenged as he headed up the path. Suddenly, Horsekit cut him off, standing in front of him.

"There are twolegs, Foxes, Badgers, and *Monsters*. And worst of all... Other cats," Horsekit whispered. Thunderkit frowned and turned to Horsekit.

"Huh-"

"SWAMPFUR!" Suddenly, both of the tom kits whipped around in alarm. Racing down the path, Windwhisker sped down camp until he reached the Medicine Cat den. Swampfur was already waiting for the tom when he arrived. Outside the den, Windwhisker recalled the events rapidly, leaving him no time to breathe.

"There were dead rats-"

"What!" Swampfur spat.

"A pile of dead rats, and flies and maggots circling them. I was hunting alongside Ryepelt and we found the pile," as Windwhisker continuances speaking, Horsekit turned to Thunderkit.

"Go back to the nursery, I'll show you the rest of camp later," Horsekit explained. Thunderkit wanted to remain with Horsekit, but accepted defeat.

"Alright..."

"There were more than ten... And it reeked," Windwhisker said with a concerned expression. Swampfur nodded and quickly shifted his thoughts.

"Make sure no cat touches those rats. Make sure no one goes near them..."

"Yes, Swampfur. And what about Fernstar?"

"She's leading a patrol. She will be back soon I believe. Let her know what you found, I have to decipher what this means," Swampfur explained with all seriousness upon his face.

"Decipher? You don't think-"

"I do. I believe it's an Omen from StarClan," Swampfur declared as Horsekit stepped nearer. The young kit heard the statement and frowned.

Windwhisker shortly left Swampfur and raced back up the ravine. As the warrior left, Horsekit approached the Medicine Cat, highly intrigued. The Medicine Cat was a sibling of his mother, yet far different than she. Fernstar was a brown tabby with pale green eyes and a slim physique. While Swampfur was rather on the heavy side and sported a brown and ginger tortoiseshell coat. The dark green eyes of the medicine cat seemed to bear a deep burden within them. Fernstar was a charismatic she cat who enjoyed the company of other cats whilst Swampfur was a recluse.

"Swampfur," Horsekit said. "What's an Omen?"

Turning to face the kit, Swampfur bore an annoyed expression. Without answering kit, Swampfur decided there was no use. Walking away, Horsekit became compelled to follow the tom.

"Shouldn't you be in the nursery?"

"I am only a moon and a half from being an apprentice!" Horsekit argued. Swampfur kept walking, not paying any attention to the young kit.

"What's an omen?" Horsekit repeated.

"A vision of a dream. StarClan gives them to me as a warning. A sign that something bad will happen," Swampfur said with eyes focused on Sky's Rock, where he was headed.

"Can you see the future?"

"Sometimes," Swampfur said flatly.

"What bad thing is going to happen?"

"It's not for the ears of kits," The Medicine Cat said, crushing Horsekit's hopes. Then, a thought popped into Horsekit's head.

"What if I can read omens? Or what if I want to one day!" Horsekit proposed, trying to satisfy his curiosity.

"You would have to be a Medicine cat," Swampfur said before racing out of reach and off to Sky's Rock. Horsekit sat began, thinking about his words. *A Medicine Cat? To see the future...*

# Chapter 9

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 8.5 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 4.5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 4.5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 4.5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 2.5 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 1 moon.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 1 moon.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 1 moon.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. **Kit**: Thunderkit (tom)

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes. Kits: Madala, and Rose

Madala- a golden tabby she cat.

Rose- a black she cat with white patches.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 5 moons old.

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Breathing in and breathing out, Gingertail followed Swampfur's orders, to no avail. The effort only followed by a series of painful coughs as the flem still resided within her lungs. Looking up, she saw Swampfur's eyes narrowed in frustration.

"It is fine," she croaked.

"No it's not. White Cough is not fine-"

"I'm old. As long as none of those kits get a cough. Besides, you are exaggerating!" Gingertail said before she continued a string of coughs.

"Take an easy," Swampfur advised.

"I'm fine," she said sternly. "Worry about getting your stocks full and let's stop these experiments-"

"*Mother*..."

"Don't you mother me!" Gingertail growled. Rising to her paws, she headed out of the Medicine Cat Den.

"Have any of the other elders gotten sick lately?"

"No," she lied. Risingsun had recently contracted coughs, but she did not want her son to bombard and heckle the elder. Gingertail was not concerned whatsoever, as coughs amongst elders were often nothing and it was still Green-leaf.

"If the cough doesn't go away, I want you in here," Swampfur sighed.

"You will not dictate where I sleep boy!" Gingertail said.

"I am the Medicine Cat and you will listen to me," Swampfur snapped.

"You are my son and you will listen to your mother," Gingertail retorted. The two cats stared at each other for sometime until Swampfur left the conversation. Leaving the den, he headed toward the Leader's den to solve the matter.

"What are you doing?"

"Going to speak to Fernstar," Swampfur said.

"Oh no you won't!"

"Mother," Swampfur threatened with a serious glare. "This is much more serious than you realize. I need to speak to my leader, and my sister, because it is my obligation as medicine cat."

Gingertail frowned and ruffled her pelt. Turning away, she began to limp away. "Don't talk about me. *I'm fine*."

Swampfur watched his mother limp away. His somber expression remained as he worried for his mother's sake. Being well beyond her moons, it was only a matter of time. As he thought about the predicaments of her sickness, he overviewed his attempts. Swampfur had attempted all means of treatment. *Honey, Catmint, Chickweed, Coltsfoot, Feverfew, Lavender, Tansy...* The Medicine Cat even instructed Gingertail to yowl to rid herself of the mucous.

Examining it further, Swampfur began to realize a fundamental trend. *The sickness isn't going away... Why?*

"Thunderkit! Over here!" Horsekit called out gleefully. Swampfur glanced up from his paws, and across the camp. At the base of the gorge, where the land lie flat, Horsekit, Thunderkit and Sandkit played Mossball while Shinyflower's litter kept score.

The Medicine Cat's gaze was drawn toward Thunderkit, almost immediately. The young kit was growing well and held a yellow gleam of ambition in his eyes. Narrowing his eyes, he finally interpreted the omen's from StarClan. Mumbling, he began to mumble the words as they came to him. "*Colette is cold. Colette is cold. Colette is cold..."*

"Swampfur?" A voice called from behind. He whipped around to face wide blue eyes. Colette was standing behind his, frozen and frightened.

"What are you doing?" Swampfur demanded.

"Nothing, I was just going to speak with-"

"You don't belong here," Swampfur whispered, audible enough. Colette appeared taken aback.

"Is something wrong?"

"Stay in the nursery," he ordered. Colette slowly made her way back, glancing back cautiously at Swampfur. Before she entered the nursery, she looked down the gorge. Although Thunderkit appeared happy, she felt terror within his happiness, his vulnerability. At any moment, it could be ripped away. *He doesn't belong here...*

"Thunderkit!" She called out. Her son's eyes flickered toward her. The urgency in her tone sent him running up the path quickly.

"Mom?"

"Come inside," she said, staring into his yellow eyes. *Yellow eyes*. Stepping back, a jolt of shock ram through her. What if she was wrong? In her son's pelt she recognized Grayfrost, but in his eyes, all she saw was McNaire.

"But I was playing Mossball with Horsekit and-"

"Get inside now," she whispered hastily. Thunderkit became worried and followed without question. Colette glanced back at Swampfur who was entering Fernstar's den.

Within the nursery, it was quiet as the other queens were out and about with their kits in the good weather. Colette paced the nursery while Thunderkit sat gazing up at his mother.

"*Thunderkit...*"

"What is it mother? Did I do something wrong?" Thunderkit asked quickly.

"Thunderkit, I am a rogue," Colette said uneasily. Thunderkit frowned.

"I know mother..."

"Thunderkit, I need to tell you about your father," she began uneasily. "Your father... Is dead."

"How? How did he die?" Thunderkit whispered sadly.

"Killed by rogues," she whispered in reply. Looking down at her paws, she yearned to say more. *I'm leaving...* "Thunderkit I-"

"What is it?"

"I... I love you," Colette quickly recovered before bringing her nose to his and nuzzling him gently. Thunderkit frowned as she coddled him and he looked up to her.

"Now can I go play?"

"Of course," she muttered. As Colette watched her son run down the path, Swampfur began to speak to Fernstar about the pressing matters facing the Clan.

"There have been several omens," Swampfur said. "All of which have led to one conclusion."

"Yes?" Fernstar eyed him anxiously.

"StarClan believes two cats do not belong here. In return, they have cursed two of our elders with a sickness that will remain until the two leave. Colette and Thunderkit must leave SkyClan before it is too late," Swampfur stated firmly as Fernstar rose to her paws.

"What a bold declaration to wait until now," she muttered under her breath. "Frankly, Swampfur, I believe you are full of fox-dung!"

"*Fernstar*-"

"You have continually exhibited your disdain for treating a rogue and for even delivering Thunderkit to begin with. Like many Warriors within this Clan, a disgusting and venomous belief lies within you that must be stopped," Fernstar declared.

"Excuse me?"

"They are victims. They are victims of the same tom that attacked this clan those many moons ago. We are no different-"

"We are Warriors," Swampfur snapped. In an intense hushed tone, he continued, "We follow StarClan. And what do they follow? Anything that gets them a mouse at the end of the day? They stand for *nothing*, Fernstar. How can you not see that?"

"How can you not see the Warrior that lies within Thunderkit? The Queen within Colette..."

"All I see is a whore, and McNaire in the living flesh-"

"*Enough*!" Fernstar hissed bitterly before turning on her brother. "They will leave when I say so..."

"You are making a mistake. Gingertail and Risingsun will die," Swampfur said adamantly. Fernstar narrowed her eyes before letting out a merciless sneer.

"Do your job..."

When Swampfur left his sister's den, the entire camp was lit with the fiery tension. Fernstar followed him out of the den and immediately left camp. A few eyes turned, but no questions were

asked. Within camp, many cats rested and enjoyed their meals. Yellowbird and Firfoot shared a robin as Windwhisker shared in their conversation. Shinyflower and Shrikeclaw shared a vole.

Sorrelfoot shared a piece of prey with Grayfrost. The mates were eating before they would continue the long day of patrols and activities. Taking a quiet bite, Grayfrost could not help but glance over to Colette.

Amongst the rock pile, she lay still watching over Thunderkit play Mossball with Horsekit and Sandkit. The young tom kit was growing up handsomely. As he grew more active, his kitten fluff and fat slowly decreased and he formed into his own. Colette stared down at her son with a glint of admiration upon her smile. Yet, something else hid amongst her expression. A longing.

"Grayfrost," Sorrelfoot whispered. "I don't understand why you insist she stays around. Thunderkit is well."

"He needs his mother," Grayfrost replied flatly.

"You need his mother," Sorrelfoot scoffed, almost under her breath.

"What is wrong? I don't see the problem-"

"The problem is that Colette does not serve a purpose. She eats. She sleeps. And she does not benefit the Clan in any clear way!" Sorrelfoot adamantly whispered, glaring over at the queen. In Sorrelfoot's opinions, all Colette did was tempt the tom cats and threaten the stability and tradition of the Clan.

"Enough," Grayfrost growled. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Sparrowkit come bounding over to them, eyes aglow. Behind him, Larkkit slowly followed.

"Hello Grayfrost," Sparrowkit greeted his father politely. Sitting beside his parents, Sparrowkit began to speak. "Will you teach us some deputy battle moves father?"

"Deputy battle moves?" Grayfrost repeated with a chuckle. To his disappointment, there was no such thing.

"Yes, Father," Larkkit said. "Teach us the secret strategies of the deputy!"

"I'm sure you will have plenty of time to learn the secret strategies when your apprentices," Grayfrost chuckled. Uneasily, he caught sight of Colette staring up at the family. Her blue eyes were not wide with resentment, but with longing.

"Grayfrost I'm sure you can show them some strategies now-"

Cutting Sorrelfoot off, Grayfrost pursued his own train of thought. "What do you two think of Thunderkit?"

"*Grayfrost*," Sorrelfoot whispered hesitantly, staring back at the two. *This is not appropriate at all*. She thought to herself but held her tongue.

"Thunderkit? He's just..."

"Weird," Larkkit replied bluntly.

"That's not very nice," Grayfrost reprimanded her but Sparrowkit interrupted.

"Grayfrost," Sorrelfoot warned.

"It's true," Sparrowkit whined.

"Let me speak to your mother alone, please," Grayfrost said.

"Aww," Sparrowkit said before he crawled away. Larkkit followed her brother stepping on his tail along the way. When the kits were out of ear, Grayfrost turned to Sorrelfoot.

"I thought we spoke about this," Grayfrost said. His eyes were narrowed and his tone was sour.

"We have," Sorrelfoot snapped. "In fact, that's all we talk about-"

"Stop being so petty! She's leaving when Thunderkit turns three moons old," he muttered.

"Really?" Sorrelfoot replied. She found it difficult to take Grayfrost seriously.

"I will tell Fernstar. I will tell Colette-"

"Let Fernstar tell her," Sorrelfoot quickly suggested. "It's for the best, Grayfrost..."

Sorrelfoot rose to her paws and discarded the bones of their meal. Grayfrost's eyes remained on the beautiful she cat across camp. Colette's pelt was radiant amongst the day and her blue eyes electrified her entire face. After a moment, she recognized Grayfrost in the corner of her eye. Meeting each other's eyes, the pain was excruciating.

Gazing into Colette's eyes, Grayfrost faced a temptation he thought he had diminished. Rather, the temptation had boiled within him, and his stomach churned in anxiety and apprehensive. Colette felt the same and saw this within Grayfrost. Grayfrost gave a small nod before walking up the ravine and out of camp. Realizing what was happening, Colette stood and found Shinyflower beside her brother, Shrikeclaw.

"Shinyflower, would you mind if you watched Thunderkit? I have to go... make dirt..."

"Of course!" Shinyflower smiled and Colette left, and followed the path out of the ravine. Silently, down by the creek, Sorrelfoot watched as Colette slipped out of camp and to the upper territory, following Grayfrost's path. Furious, Sorrelfoot focused on the running through her twos. Slowly, she submerged her face within the shallow creek, before screaming in rage.

Following his scent, Colette met Grayfrost amongst the tree line, past the open area before the ravine. As soon as they were together, Grayfrost nuzzled Colette affectionately and she returned the same affection as she licked his muzzle. Enthralled in passion, the two did not recognize the single cat only a few tree-lengths away.

The ginger she cat narrowed her eyes as she viewed the events that took forth. Quickly, Ruby raced away and returned to deliver the

message. She did not understand Colette's actions, yet she was certain of one thing. *McNaire won't be happy...*

# Chapter 10

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 9 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 3 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 3 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 1.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

Risingsun- a golden tabby tom. Retired deputy.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. Kit: Thunderkit (tom)

Ruby- a ginger she cat with blue eyes. Expecting kits.

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 5.5 moons old.

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*-1/2 moon has passed-*

Settling into the horizon, the sun began to take its trying place in the west. Light slowly faded away, but the Clan did not halt by any means.

Although it was nearing the hour of sleep, many enjoyed their last meals of the day while the kits played. While the others still had energy to spend, Horsekit and Thunderkit resided by a nearby creek, enjoying the cool touch of the water amongst their toes. For Horsekit, it felt good to take a break and observe his surroundings.

However, his sisters' energy was never spent and they continued playing down by the gorge. Thunderkit proved to be a fitting companion, if not better. Though, ever since they became friends, Thunderkit's mouth ran faster than any rabbit.

"I can't believe you're going to be an apprentice, in a moon," Thunderkit said in awe as he looked to Horsekit. Closing his eyes, he tried to feel the slight breeze upon his whiskers. He inhaled, taking in the scents. Rocks and moss collided with the water and provided a unique scent of the area. Sighing he turned to Thunderkit.

"Listen," Horsekit began. Fumbling with his paws, he procrastinated on whether to mention it to Thunderkit. Ultimately, he decided Thunderkit would know sooner or later. "Do you think.. This is

stupid-"

"Nah! Keep going," Thunderkit encouraged.

"Do you think I could be a Medicine Cat?" Horsekit said with a touch of uneasiness.

Thunderkit's eyes went wide. "You can be whatever you want to be... But *Horsekit,* what about being a Warrior? What about saving the Clan!"

"I would be," Horsekit chuckled. "I wanna make things better. Gingertail and Risingsun are really sick and all my kin are nervous.."

"If you want to! As long as I can boss you around when I'm a Warrior!" Thunderkit laughed. Horsekit smiled and looked down at him, smaller yet bigger in other ways.

"I'm gonna miss hanging around with you," Horsekit admitted.

"You'll still come around? Right?"

"Sure but... Not all the time," he explained. Thunderkit began to understand Horsekit's words and grew sad.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Thunderkit muttered.

"Well, Sparrowkit and Larkkit will still be in the nursery. And! Shinyflower's kits are getting older," Horsekit suggested. Thunderkit made a face but soon turned away.

"I guess..."

"What do you want to be?"

"Huh?"

"What do you want to be," Horsekit repeated. Thunderkit tilted his head.

"Well... I always assumed I'd be a warrior I guess.. That's what I

want," Thunderkit muttered. "I never really thought about it."

"Never?"

"Well," Thunderkit searched for the words. "I just... I just want to be me. And be liked for being me..."

"You will be," Horsekit said. "You already are! Look, Turtlekit and Swallowkit are spying on us..."

"Wanna chase them off?" Thunderkit purposed. "Come on!"

"On the count of three... One... Two-"

Thunderkit and Horsekit continued in bliss chasing the little she kits around. At the time, nothing concerned them, and nothing would ever concern them. Meanwhile, another cat was burdened with a heavy heart.

Passion had once again infested Colette's heart, and she could not quench it. She longed for Grayfrost and wanted to watch their son grow up. Colette wanted to remain at his side, radiant and in love. Safe.

Following the same trail back toward their location, Colette slinked under bushes until she arrived beside a large maple. Patiently, she waited for Grayfrost to arrive as he had promised he would. When time began to pass painfully, she preoccupied herself. She fiddled with her paws until the crunch of forest debris was heard nearby.

Colette's ears immediately perked up, and she tried to distinguish if it was Grayfrost. Being deputy, Grayfrost arranged the patrols in such a way that he positioned less warriors on the upper territory during their times together. However, Fernstar, Firfoot and Shrikeclaw were notorious for going hunting alone.

Hiding in the thick of the bush, Colette's eyes peered through. Yet, the visibility was poor and she found it difficult to see. As the cat came into picture, she was only able to see monstrous white paws. Assuming it was Grayfrost, Colette immediately forfeited her position and slipped out of the bush.

Instead, she came face to face with the treacherous tom she had left almost three moons ago. Stuttering, she found it difficult to say anything or take any sort of action. He took action.

"I must speak with you," he whispered stepping forward cautiously.

"Get away!" She cried out. "*McNaire*..."

"No one leaves. Not for good," he whispered, narrowing his eyes. His posture stiffened and he looked down at the young she cat. "I need you to come back with me."

"Why would I-"

"I want you Colette," he said. "And you want me."

"You are sick," she spat.

"You are mad," McNaire declared. "To think you can run away to SkyClan! To try to hide my son-"

"He's not your son," Colette snapped. McNaire stepped back and a small smirk formed.

"So there is a tom..." McNaire played her. Colette cursed herself as she understood and she looked to the ground.

"He's not your son. *I am not yours,"* Colette hissed in disdain and disgust.

"You will be," he whispered. Before he could make good on his promise, someone shot from the trees. Lunging toward McNaire, the newcomer and McNaire engaged violently in a battle until more Warriors made themselves known. And with more Warriors, came more rogues.

"Get out," Ryepelt ordered Colette before he raced into the battle. Fernstar was fully engaged in fighting McNaire as Ryepelt came to his mate's side.

Colette was immediately overwhelmed by nearing rogue scents and she retreated from the area. Racing away, her mind whirled with

the choices she had to make. She did not want to make them.

"Colette!" Grayfrost called out. She shot out of the forest, ran down the path into camp and down into the gorge. Hiding amongst the foliage, she was determined to remain until all was done.

McNaire's words seeped into her heart and she began to rethink her position. Colette could no longer she herself by Grayfrost's side. Her future became muddy and dark. All she could see was a scowl upon Sorrelfoot's face, and disappointment across the entire clan as Thunderkit was made an apprentice. She began to weep bitterly. "*Thunderkit...*"

Grayfrost stood at the top of the ravine, scanning the area blindly for her while muttering curses to himself. He was prepared to search camp when a cry erupted behind him. A few yowls signaled and Grayfrost detected their meaning. The rogues and Warrior were both retreating.

Almost immediately following, Windwhisker broke through the trees, shocked and out of breath. Racing into camp he called frantically for Swampfur. Somehow, the Medicine cat appeared ready. Everyone seemed to expect the battle... Except Grayfrost.

Whipping around he searched for Fernstar. Moments occurred before she finally broke through the foliage, limping and using Yellowbird as aid. Grayfrost began to speak when an unexpected commotion occurred. Breaking through the trees, Firfoot and Honeypaw slowly helped Ryepelt to camp, leaving a trail of blood in their path.

"*Oh StarClan...*" Grayfrost immediately turned toward Fernstar, drowsy and weak. The leader appeared as if she had faced death. "What happened? What was this!"

"You betrayed your Clan," she said flatly. She snickered, "And I lost a life for it-"

"What!"

"You're a disgrace," Fernstar muttered vengefully, as Yellowbird

tried to remain neutral.

"Come on," Yellowbird insisted they move on. The Warrior only acknowledged that her leader was in deep and traumatic stress. Her mate, Ryepelt, had been ripped apart by the same rogue she lost a life to. Yellowbird had no presumptions or further knowledge of why the deputy was not informed.

"Fernstar!" Grayfrost and Shrikeclaw called in unison.

Grayfrost whipped around to see Shrikeclaw and Windwhisker escorting a rouge. The she cat was a bold and vibrant ginger tabby, and beautiful to the eye. Yet, her scowl remained as the toms placed her in the Leader's den, and guarded it until further orders.

Shifting her gaze, Fernstar saw that Swampfur was now treating Ryepelt. Horsekit was beside him in the thick of the commotion, and began to ask questions as soon as able.

"What about the elders?"

"The worst are treated first. No matter the relation or history," Swampfur replied gruffly before diving into the Medicine Cat den. The Medicine cat acted quickly, applying all of the first herbs.

Horsekit frowned at the medicine cat's statement, as Swampfur's mother was sickly. Horsekit planned to prompt further to understand him when his words were interrupted.

"*Ryepelt*.." Before he could finish applying the cobwebs, Fernstar entered the Medicine cat den.

Immediately, Swampfur looked up and rolled his eyes. "Get out and stay out! Until I'm finished!"

"Will he be alright?" Fernstar managed to ask. Swampfur narrowed his eyes remembering their previous conversation.

"*Let me do my job*," he snapped, recalling her previous demand. After his request, Honeypaw and Firfoot followed their leader out of the den, leaving Ryepelt's fate in their Medicine Cat's paws. Fernstar paced feverishly as another commotion broke out amongst the

camp.

"Ruby!" From the gorge, Colette surged  out of the safety of the foliage. Racing up to the leader's den, the Warriors guarding the den halted her. "Let me in!"

Instead, Windwhisker spat on the she cat and she retaliated viscously.

"Let her in," Fernstar called out. Windwhisker frowned but followed his leader's demands. Shrikeclaw and the tom exchanged a worried glance before Fernstar made her way to the tallest rock amongst the rock pile.

"From now on, Colette is no longer welcome here. Anyone who objects... Shall face the consequences as I see fit," Fernstar declared scanning the frantic Clan. All warriors, elders and queens alike were present. Even Thunderkit, tried to understand as he clung to the nursery walls.

Grayfrost closed his eyes and muttered no word. From behind, Sorrelfoot crept up quietly behind him before she resided beside him. Her glare was not malicious, nor hateful. Sorrelfoot's expression was filled with grief and pity.

"I warned you Grayfrost," Sorrelfoot whispered. Wincing, Grayfrost uttered no word. Instead, he stalked away toward Sky's den, leaving his mate.

"Ruby!" Colette said once more as she clung to the she cat's side. Groggily, the rogue glanced up at Colette. Coughing up blood, the rogue could barely speak.

"Co... Colette," she winced. "You little piece of dung!"

"Ruby," Colette said her name as if to stop further words, yet Ruby went on.

"They're all dead," she croaked. "All the tom kits, and even some of the she kits. Jocaste ran and now she is dead. And it's all your fault you mousebrain..."

"Ruby, I couldn't stay there. He would have killed my son," Colette defended herself but it was no use.

"So you sacrificed the lives of everyone else's kits..." Ruby trailed off as her eyes grew droopy. Suddenly, she jerked awake and looked to Colette. "The Warriors are not your own. They killed my kits... Ripped open my belly... They are murderers. Just like McNaire..."

"You're wrong-"

"Go back to McNaire. He killed Opal's kits. If you don't return, he will kill Sage and Opal and drop their bodies in the ravine," Ruby said feebly.

"You're lying," Colette replied coldly. Looking away, she could not bare to face the she cat.

"I have no reason to lie... There's nothing left anymore," she retorted bitterly. "*Go back*."

Ruby's last words continued ringing on in Colette's mind. She had to face the truth. *I have to do what's best...*

# Chapter 11

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 9 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. Kits:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 3 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 3 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2.5 moons.

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Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

**Elders**:
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Gingertail- a tortoiseshell she cat with a bright ginger tail. She has worse hearing and is older.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. Kit: Thunderkit (tom)

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 5.5 moons old.

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The leader's droopy eyes gazed over camp. Tiredness was a burden she had to bare, for there were too many of her loved ones within the Medicine Cat den. Drifting off, she shuddered and her eyes shot open before drifting off again. Taking a breath, she peaked through into the Medicine Cat den.

Eyeing, she observed Swampfur overlooking their mother, Gingertail. Brief and quiet whispers were exchanged, even though it pained the she cat to do so. Fernstar leaned forward, so that she may hear clearly.

"I can go fetch some more..."

"No," Gingertail croaked. "Please, just let me rest."

"Mother, you will die. You are dying," he said weakly.

"Don't you see?" His mother whispered. Swampfur made a slight frown, tilting his head. He did not understand his mother. Yet, he was too enthralled in grief and worry to fully comprehend her words. "I am content. I have served SkyClan all these years. *Now*, my son is a devout Medicine Cat who cares deeply for this Clan. My daughters have seen pain, but I believe Sagepaw will return and Fernstar's litter proves to have great potential. Some would have preferred a Warrior's death, but I am grateful to have witnessed my beautiful children, and their children."

"Mother," Swampfur felt his throat clench and his face grew hot. "Would you like me to get Fernstar and Firfoot?"

"No," she muttered. Closing her eyes, she breathed in from her nose.

"Let me sleep..."

Fernstar turned away from the Medicine Cat den, and toward the Warrior's den. Walking up the path, she briefly made out the figure of Grayfrost, outside the den. Quietly, the tom lifted his head and faced the she cat. Although they had quarreled earlier, their eyes meant on better terms. Fernstar's eyes softened and Grayfrost walked forward.

Following her, Grayfrost made his way past the rock pile. They sat upon a large  smooth stone, and Fernstar immediately began to apologize.

"A few Warrior's had made complaints about Colette leaving a few times. After a few Warrior's caught sight of Rogue Scouts, we knew it was only a matter of time before McNaire came for her," Fernstar explained.

"You kept me in the dark," Grayfrost snickered. He had no idea that SkyClan was preparing for a battle. No one had revealed anything. It was apparent to him, that he had lost all of his Clan's trust.

"I am sorry for what I said earlier-"

"You were right," Grayfrost muttered.

"No. You are not a disgrace. You are our deputy and future leader, and for that, I should have trusted your actions and..."

"Fernstar," Grayfrost stopped her. "I broke an oath by mating with a rogue and now I have a son. I have ruined Sorrelfoot's life, and diminished my kits' names. You have every right to call me a disgrace."

A brief period of silence swept over the two cats. The truth being said was more chilling than in her mind. Finding the right words to say we're difficult.

"No. Some rogues may be faulty, but I recognize the truth. You love that rogue and I will not let a Clan a savages separate you and your happiness-"

"What!"

"Colette will stay. Thunderkit will stay. And McNaire will pay. We will prepare ourselves and return Opalshine and Sagepaw to their rightful positions as members of SkyClan," Fernstar declared.

"No... Fernstar you cannot-"

"It is done, Grayfrost. I too, have faults. But I will not compromise my believes to satisfy a Clan of shallow and pretentious hearts," his leader replied.

Thundering within his chest, Grayfrost panicked. His own leader was prepared to make his fears reality with a simple decree in the morning. Poisoning his thoughts and jumping to conclusion, Grayfrost's fear began to control him. *I cannot let this happen. I cannot let Colette stay*. Sorrelfoot's life and name would be tarnished. Larkkit and Sparrowkit would have no true father. And Thunderkit, would have to live as a bastard for the rest of his moons.

The anxiety has reached him and he slowly unsheathed his claws. Grayfrost looked at his leader, who was focused on the night sky. Taking a breath, he was prepared. Grayfrost was prepared to stop Fernstar's actions, to strike her if he must, but a call came from the medicine cat den.

"Fernstar!" Swampfur called out. Both leader and deputy whipped around to see Swampfur scanning the area. Fernstar immediately sprung to her feet and reached Swampfur's side.

"What is it?"

"Gingertail has passed," the words reached Fernstar and she winced. Dropping her head, she fell to her paws, not quite sure of how to react. Fernstar and her mother had an upsetting relationship even unto her death. The unsettled dispute would never fully be healed. Yet, Fernstar worried more for Firfoot's sake.

"I will get Firfoot. Please, look over Ryepelt and Risingsun..."

"I'm sorry I have not told you, Fernstar. Risingsun passed earlier tonight," Swampfur said. Fernstar was frozen in shock. SkyClan had

lost two elders in one night, and her mate, Ryepelt, was still in the paws of StarClan.

"I will notify the Clan. Their vigils will be in the morning," she said and she trailed off. Crawling up the ravine, she made her way to the Warrior's den, glancing back once.

Grayfrost remained where they had their discussion. The deputy seemed frozen in thought. Fernstar assumes it was of the recent elders' deaths. But Grayfrost, was carrying the tremendous burden of a fear. I cannot let her make that decree.

As soon as Fernstar disappeared into the Warrior's den, Grayfrost took action. He wasted no time as he hastily made his way to the nursery. Peering instead, he did his best not to disturb anyone.

Stepping over to Sorrelfoot, he gently nudged her. Her eyes shot open but she remained silence as she saw Grayfrost's gesture. Quietly, she glanced down at the kits. Carefully, she moved away. The two slipped outside the nursery, and Grayfrost led them away.

"What do you want?"

"I spoke with Fernstar," Grayfrost began. "She wants to make Colette a member of this Clan. She feels ashamed of the disdain for rogues within SkyClan."

"Oh StarClan," she hastily cursed.

"Exactly. I need your help," he revealed, looking up to Sorrelfoot. Immediately, Sorrelfoot chuckled at this.

"What? How are we going to stop this?"

"When the Clan sets off for the vigil. We will be watching Colette. Fernstar announced to the Clan that Colette is no longer welcome here. If we claim this and make her leave, we will escape this fate.."

"Except that she isn't going to leave," Sorrelfoot whispered in realization.

"All I need you to do, is bring Colette to me, near Sky's Den and

take Thunderkit into the nursery. Tell him Colette has left," Grayfrost instructed. "I will make Colette leave. For good."

"Are you sure you are capable?" Sorrelfoot questioned him. Grayfrost had been weak when it came to Colette. She worried if he could see this through.

"Completely," he said coldly, sending shivers down Sorrelfoot's spine. She gave a curt nod before returning to the nursery. In the morning, their fate would change.

As soon as dawn's rays began to cascade across the ravine, Colette burst into action. Taking Ruby's body, she dragged it down the path. The strenuous work pained her limited strength, but she pursued anyway.

Grunting all the way, the intense labor was foreign to Colette, who had never had to drag the weight of a dead body before. She imagined that the SkyClan warriors had it easy, as they lugged prey to camp each day. Despite the circumstances, she successfully made it to the forest amongst the gorge.

Continuing to drag her into the forest, once the trees hid the view of camp, she settled on a soft earthed area. Unsheathing her claws, she began to take up and dig a place for Ruby. Even though the rogue had insulted and cursed her name, Colette felt obligated to give the she cat a proper burial. Especially after everything Colette had caused, she owed Ruby.

Gradually, she continued digging the earth up until she felt the sun's warm rays touch her back. Glancing upward, she noticed that it was no longer dawn. Colette panicked and looked to Ruby. Gently she placed the she cat in the shallow grave and kicked the dirt on top. Colette was prepared to continue went a sharp call halted this.

"What do you think you're doing!"

"I was just-"

"Burial on SkyClan territory is reserved for Warriors," Sorrelfoot stated strictly as she neared the she cat. Colette grew flustered and

she felt ashamed.

"I am very sorry," she insisted. "I didn't know."

"Come with me. *Now*."

# Chapter 12

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentice**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 9 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 3 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 3 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 1.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

McCallistar- a black furred tom with yellow eyes.

Colette- a beautiful white she cat with bright blue eyes. Kit: Thunderkit (tom)

Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 5.5 moons old.

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"*Sorrelfoot please*!" Colette begged as the she cat pushed her toward camp. With narrowed eyes, Sorrelfoot scoffed.

"What?"

"Just... Just let me go now. I can leave, as promised. No one will ever know I buried Ruby-"

"This is not about Ruby," Sorrelfoot said. "Keep walking. Toward Sky's den."

"What is this about?"

"Fernstar said you were not welcome anymore. Why are you still here?"

"I wasn't sure when I had to leave-"

"You will be leaving now. Grayfrost will oversee it," Sorrelfoot explained flatly. Colette's eyes widened.

"Sorrelfoot..."

"Don't speak," she snapped bitterly.

"I am sorry," Colette whispered.

"No. You're not," Sorrelfoot corrected.

"Yes, I-"

"If you were sorry," Sorrelfoot snickered. "You would not have gotten pregnant *again*."

Colette stopped in shock. *How does she know? I told no one...*

"I can tell," Sorrelfoot said. Looking ahead, she came to a stop. "We're here."

Before them, stood a huge stone rock. According to SkyClan tradition, the rock was sacred to them as it was den to an important founder of their Clan. In front of the stone, sat Grayfrost. Beside him, Colette panicked at the sight of Thunderkit.

"Mother!" Thunderkit smiled before bounding over to them. Before he reached them, Sorrelfoot muttered an order to her.

"Tell him nothing. Tell him you want to leave. Tell him goodbye..."

As soon as her kit ran into her, they touched noses and Colette smiled. Thunderkit had grown so much from the first time she set eyes on him. She hoped that StarClan would allow her to see him once again.

"Grayfrost said there was something important you had to tell me! Some good news!" Thunderkit smiled. Colette looked up, and met eyes with Grayfrost. The tom shook his head and Colette held back the truth she desperately wanted to share.

"Thunderkit... You're going to be an *apprentice* someday. Then, when you're big enough. You're going to be a great Warrior," Colette said with teary eyes. Meeting eyes with her son, it was too powerful. At that moment, Colette was more sure of her love for Thunderkit, than any other moment. Yet, she knew she could never be with her son. She belonged to someone else.

"Is everything okay?"

"Thunderkit," she began weakly. "I am leaving-"

"What? Why!"

"I have to.."

"No! You don't have-"

"I want to," she said stopping further words. Thunderkit narrowed his eyes and stepped back in pain. Looking to Grayfrost and

Sorrelfoot, the two tried to avoid eye contact.

"*No*," Thunderkit murmured as he fought tears.

"I want to go back. I love a rogue," Colette whispered.

"NO!" Thunderkit shouted. At this, Grayfrost glanced to Sorrelfoot with a pleading request. Colette recognized what she was about to do and made haste with her words.

"I'll be back soon, I promise..." Sorrelfoot stepped forward. Taking Thunderkit by the scruff, she began to take him away.

"Let me go!" Thunderkit cried out.

Colette turned back to Grayfrost as her son was carried away. His calm eyes met her pained ones, and she stepped toward him. Grayfrost maintained his control as she searched for some sort of connection with Grayfrost.

Quietly she murmured, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"You saved us. Thunderkit will have a future," Colette said with a small smile. "Grayfrost, I have to tell you something before I leave-"

"Who said you were leaving?" Grayfrost's words were cold.

"Sorrelfoot said-"

"Everything she was asked to say," Grayfrost replied. Realizing the full extent of the situation, a heavy animalistic fear manifested itself. She could not run. She could not fight.

"*Please*, Grayfrost," Colette said. She could only beg. Stepping forward, his face held no expression. Grayfrost was enthralled in the focus of executing the mission. Nothing else mattered.

"You are on of McNaire's?"

"No! No.."

"You lied to me," he reminded her. Grayfrost was within striking distance. All he had to do was spring into action.

"If you let me go," Colette whispered. "I won't come back."

The offer tempted Grayfrost. Considering it, he saw no reason for Colette to break a promise. Grayfrost saw no con to keeping the she cat alive. Yet, he knew, he could never be at peace with the rogue in his life.

"*Goodbye Colette*," he murmured. His claws unsheathed and he brought his claws across her face, scarring the beautiful she cat, forever. As she yowled in pain, he quickly silenced her by crushing his throat with his paw.

Just as Colette screamed, Sorrelfoot pushed Thunderkit into the Medicine Cat den. The den was empty and Sorrelfoot immediately dropped the kit and defended the exit.

Thunderkit's shouts masked his mother's screams, as Grayfrost finished the task. The kit struggled and yowled, making it much more difficult than she thought it would be.

"I want my mother," he cried. Reaching the peak of her nerves, she lashed out.

"She left you! You filthy little half-blood bastard!" Sorrelfoot screamed.

Immediately, Thunderkit went silent. Quietly, tears streaked down his cheek and onto his tiny whiskers. As the young tom sniffles, Sorrelfoot began to feel a heavy guilt.

"She's gone," Sorrelfoot whispered. "I'm sorry."

Shortly, she left the kit, alone and distraught. Sorrelfoot walked over to Sky's Den, and saw no traipse of Colette or Grayfrost's presence. *He did it.* She thought to herself. Despite her previous expectations, she was not satisfied.

Passing Swampfur, the tom turned back to look at the she cat. Catching up with her, he began to speak.

"Sorrelfoot?"

"Yes," she replied, turning to face the Medicine Cat.

"Someone buried Ruby on Clan territory... When I discovered this, the grave was shallow and... It looked as if... As if a fox or rodent had been there. Maggots. Decay. I won't elaborate but I'm very concerned," Swampfur confided. Sorrelfoot nodded and looked away.

"I'm sure all will be well soon."

# Chapter 13

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

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**Warriors**:
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Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

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Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

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**Apprentice**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 9 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**: Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 5 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 3 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 3 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 1.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 1.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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"Grayfrost," a low growl sent his hair on edge. Turning, the large tabby tom faced the gentle, Fernstar. Her pale green eyes differed from her normal state, as they were filled with confusion. "I know what you did-"

"You have no proof," Grayfrost retorted cooly. She stepped back, taken by surprise. Fernstar had expected Grayfrost to struggle and lie, as he had done his whole life when faced with conflict. After a brief period of time, she lost her authoritative facade.

"I don't understand. Why?"

"You were going to welcome a rogue into this Clan. You were going to ruin tradition and my future. Not only my future, but Sorrelfoot's, Sparrowkit's and Larkkit's. Thunderkit would live a life he didn't deserve-"

"Thunderkit is your son," Fernstar stated in exasperation.

"Maybe," he muttered. "But if Thunderkit receives a better chance than Sparrowkit and Larkkit. I will never live with myself..."

"Thunderkit should not be punished for your mistakes," Fernstar scoffed and turned away. Her own deputy, her friend and a young tom she had so much faith in, had committed a despicable crime. Grayfrost not only killed her, but would do it again. *How could this have happened?* She thought to herself.

"Never make me choose again," Grayfrost warned between gritted teeth. "*Never*."

As Grayfrost stalked away, Fernstar was frozen in thought. Lost in thoughts and consequences, she did not know how to move forward. A deep fear embellished itself within her. Fernstar did not know what the future of her Clan would look like. Fernstar had lost faith in her leadership and judgement. And now, enemies lie within close surroundings. Enemies were within their territory, their dens, and right beside Fernstar.

Looking up to the sky, she was confident of her decision. Fernstar had to make a stand. She had to face the fear of change and possibly death. At dawn, she would make her stand. *You will become a warrior Thunderkit. You will be known as the son of Grayfrost, whether you like it or not.*

After leaving his leader, the deputy crossed over the rock pile until he reached the nursery. Peaking inside, he noticed many sleeping queens and kits. Quietly, he requested Sorrelfoot's presence. Eventually, the she cat rose and left their kits.

Sorrelfoot grimaced at his voice. *What could he want now, in the*

*middle of the night?* Making her way past the queens and kits, she exited the nursery and followed Grayfrost down the dirt path. Quietly, they met amongst the rock pile.

"It is over," he said coldly. Sorrelfoot frowned but came to understand, Grayfrost's own guilt had reached him.

"Grayfrost what are you-"

"You killed her. You're a disgrace. You are a jealous pile of fox dung and I should've realized it moons ago!"

"I didn't make *you* kill her," Sorrelfoot hissed adamantly. "I didn't make *you* do anything-"

"Save your lies!"

"*Shut up*," Sorrelfoot snapped. "I gave up my own ambitions to be by *your* side. To be *your* mate. I have sacrificed more than six moons to raise *your* kits. I have been nothing but loyal and loving to you, because I love you. And you trade everything we worked so hard to achieve for another she cat. A she cat that means nothing to you except what you used her for. Her son, means nothing to you. Yet, you ruined everything. And you continue to ruin everything!"

"You're young Grayfrost. Soon, you will realize you cannot come back from this. Especially, if they find out you have a bastard," Sorrelfoot finished. She was tired of fighting. She was tired of trying to be the mate or she cat he wanted.

"*It is through...*"

"It was through as soon as you chose her," Sorrelfoot murmured. Stalking away, she returned to the nursery where she found her kits sleeping easily. Curling around then, her tail wrapped around both of them, pulling them close.

*Grayfrost will never take them. Grayfrost will never hurt them*. Sorrelfoot decided silently.

A small tunnel was the only exit of the Nursery den. Out, through the back, a young tom kit slipped through following the older tom.

When they slipped into the shadows of the ravine, they convened there, against the shadows. Remaining there, they waited until there were no figures left in the center of camp.

"I'm really sorry Thunderkit," Horsekit began in a soft whisper. The other kit stared at the states, silently. "Would you like to talk about it?"

Thunderkit's eyes did not shift from the night sky, and remained locked. Glassy, it seemed as if Thunderkit was barely stable. Weak and fragile, Horsekit wanted to comfort him as best as he could. However, it proved to be a challenge.

"Gingertail taught me about StarClan. She said, if you stare at the stars long enough, you can see the High Rock of StarClan, and the first and oldest leaders resting amongst it," Horsekit said, returning a gaze to the stars. Beside him, Horsekit's friend shifted and gazed down at his paws.

"I want to be there," Thunderkit muttered, and suddenly, his eyes met Horsekit's eyes. Filled with a fiery purpose, Thunderkit's eyes were wide. "I want to be at that High Rock. I see it, Horsekit. I want to go there. I want to sit on the top of the High Rock..."

"Only leaders sit on the top of High Rocks," Horsekit replied.

"Then, I want to be a leader," Thunderkit declared. "The greatest leader that ever lived."

"Then I promise you," Horsekit said. "You will be."

"What?"

"Together, we will make you leader. No matter what we have to do. You will be the greatest leader that ever lived," Horsekit promised. "With the best Medicine Cat beside you."

For the first time since his mother left, Thunderkit smiled. In realization, he cursed himself, ridding the smile from his face. *She's gone. What is a smile for?* Glancing down, he narrowed his eyes.

"Goodnight," Horsekit said.

"Goodnight, Horsekit," Thunderkit muttered glancing back up to the sky.

Moments passed and a strange feeling overcame him. Suddenly, a stinging occurred in his brain and he doubled over in pain. His eyes clouded and his eyes went black.

Images flickered before him. A beautiful she cat with a tortoiseshell coat purring. The she cat slinked toward him. Then, it changed. He saw the floor of a lake as paws dug into his shoulders, pushing him under until he could no longer breathe. Numerous more occurred, all of cats he did not recognize before one. A dark furred tom with big blue eyes, stalking around in circles. Then, they ended. And he stared at the cold hard ground.

As he resumed normal breaths, he looked over his shoulder. Paranoia and fear crept over his pelt after the supernatural experience. Without another thought of it, he returned to the nursery.

# Chapter 14

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

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**Kits**:
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Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 5 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 5 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 3 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 3 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 2.5 moons.

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**Elders**:
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**Rogues**:

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Opal- a golden tabby she cat with blue eyes.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 5.5 moons old.

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The heat stirred and absorbed within the space. Noon and desolate, the overheated bodies baked in silence, clinging to the minor shadows of the space. No whisper was uttered for their tongues were parched and their throat broken from the dry air.

Turning toward the exit of the space, Opal recognized the shadow of a tom. Pacing back and forth outside the structure. She winced and took a heavy breath. *Jocaste ran. Sage is dead.*

Impulse was surging through her. Nothing was left. Her litter was dead. Her friends were murdered. And Sage, placed under her protection, was gone.

Raising her eyes up, she gazed around at her surroundings. Remanence of hay and straw laid the area and insulated the barn, trapping the air within. Only a few other she cats remained after the last days of Green-leaf, where heat picked off the weakest and least fed. Before that, McNaire killed and took who he liked. Opal expected McNaire soon as her kits were dead and she was not pregnant. It disgusted her, but it was apart of her life.

Outside, the sound of voices set Opal on edge. The pacing tom's shadow stopped and disappeared completely before a loud commotion erupted. The commotion consisted of shouting and howling of variance.

Opal darted to the exit where she peaked out carefully. On the patch of grass and stones, McNaire confronted another tom.

"You betrayed *me*."

"I did not," the tom replied coldly. A jet black tom stood away from McNaire, his muscular structure seemed familiar. The similarity of the toms troubled Opal and she drew back.

"Your piece of fox-dung-"

"Don't you touch her," McCallistar snapped bitterly.

Immediately, McNaire scowled and he snarled bitterly. Advancing toward his brother, he hissed. "She's not yours. I gave her to you. I have given my daughters to you-"

"I am leaving."

"No," McNaire meowed gruffly. With a narrowed glance he advanced forward. "You will die for your actions."

"So be it," McCallistar retorted.

McNaire charged and took McCallistar by the scruff. Fangs flared, McCallistar took an irritating and deadly bite to the neck. Hissing, he turned on his brother and used his weight to toss him aside. Equally matched, McNaire was thrown off and onto his paws. As the battle between the two toms raged on, the younger toms circled around chanting and cheering for McNaire.

The crowd blocked Opal's view. Cringing at the thought, she changed her mind. Taking off toward the foreign dwellings, she slipped past the crowd of tom cats, oblivious to her presence. Racing toward the lesser shelters and dens, she found a place amongst another barn. The smell did not reek as her barn, and it was silent.

Peaking within, Opal caught sight of a small figure amongst the nests. As soon as Opal stepped inside, the cat stirred. The golden tabby she cat whipped around and her beautiful green eyes grew wide in delight.

"Opal!" Sage exclaimed, racing to the she cat's flank. She greeted her by touching noses. Opal returned the greeting but grew anxious by the second. *Any moment, we could be caught.*

"We have to leave," Opal explained.

"I heard the howls. What's going on?"

"It's McCallistar and McNaire..."

"No," Sage murmured. Her expression turned frantic and she looked over Opal, to see a glimpse of the crowd of toms. "I won't leave without him."

"*Sage*. They imprisoned us. *Can't you see that?*"

"McCallistar isn't like McNaire."

"If we leave, there is no reason the clans cannot reclaim the land. If we leave, we can go *home,"* Opal tried to speak sense to her. Sage seemed hesitant but nodded.

"We need to run," Sage said in return. Opal have a small nod of agreement and the she cats took off. With all of their kits gone, nothing held them back. Their paws were free to race over the broken and scrappy land. Sprinting toward the wide patches of green in the distance, Sage did not look back.

Taken back into a trance, she saw herself fulfilling the miss she had made each morning: Racing across the moor past the ravine. Hurdling toward the endless horizon. Returning to her beloved clan she was taken from. Sage imagined the reunion of her mother and her. Firfoot's sweet pelt and her father's tail wrapped around the both of them. Returning to her apprenticeship which she had longed to finish from the day she was taken. Sage had no idea if would Grayfrost would be relieved, or disappointed on her form after so many moons.

*Sagepaw*. *I am Sagepaw now*. When it seemed she had left the pain in the past, it returned. Reality of the evil present returned, and she heard a loud scream echo behind her. Whipping around, Sage's eyes caught sight of Opal. Pinned to the ground, the she cat could not free herself as McNaire savagely ripped her apart. Sinking his fangs into her spine, she cried out.

Sage's breath stopped and she catches a slight glimpse of the bodies left behind McNaire. All of the toms were dead. Every supporter, every opponent, even McCallistar, lay dead.

Horror stricken and terror paralyzing her body, she marveled at the state of the world she lived upon. Without another thought, she

raced away from Clan territory and toward the nearby twolegplace.

"All cats of SkyClan, gather around the rock-pile! Young and old!" Fernstar's words echoed throughout the camp before the dawn patrols were even established. Shifting in their nests, clan members slowly came to their senses.

The elders were the first to fully take the the announcement, as they were rare and interesting occurrences. The only true elder remaining in SkyClan was Sorrelfoot and Windwhisker's father, and elder Silverclaw. Many suspected Darkgorge would join them soon.

"She said it wrong. Young *and* old? Clan meetings aren't for kits-"

"It must be important," Sunnystripe replied.

First amongst the clan to make their way over to the rock-pile, Silverclaw happened to notice the entrance of the entire nursery. Queens escorted their kits down the path and near the pile, although they did not bother allowing them to climb upon them.

Silverclaw narrowed his eyes when his saw the last kit exit the nursery. Thunderkit, quiet and alone, sat beside the nursery without a budge. His ears were perked, but his eyes were drooped. The elder frowned. *The rogue left.* He quickly assumed.

When it seemed the entirety of SkyClan was present, Fernstar continued. Her eyes glanced over the cats, although she did not meet the eyes of Grayfrost or Sorrelfoot. Taking a deep breath, her tone was calm.

"The past few moons have been confusing to many. As leader of our Clan, I have knowingly hid these answers for the good of our clan," she declared. Frowns and grimaces entered in and she immediately spoke over the subtle chatter. "Many of you questioned why I would let a rogue raise her kit within our Clan."

As she stepped closer to the reveal, she could feel Grayfrost's composure become comprised and panic fill his heart. Fernstar took relief, knowing he would serve this punishment.

"Grayfrost had relations with the rogue named Colette. In result, she

became pregnant with Grayfrost's kits," Fernstar addressed. *Leaving out McNaire and any other reasons to question Grayfrost's father-ship is for the best.* She decided.

"Thunderkit is the son of Grayfrost, half-Clan, half-rogue. Because of his bloodline he must be trained and fight as a warrior as decreed in the law of SkyClan. Thunderkit belongs here with his next of kin and shall be treated no differently," Fernstar declared sending a stern glare towards Grayfrost and those she would suspect of discrimination. "You may make your own judgements. But all cats make mistakes. My deputy will continue to serve as my deputy and a great warrior of this clan. That concludes what I have to say."

The shock of the declaration was immense. Sorrelfoot held herself together by not muttering a word. Larkkit and Sparrowkit begged and prodded their mother was answers. Grayfrost quickly fled the scene with a furious lash of his tail. Darkgorge looked down in a pool of shame for his son. As for Thunderkit, his world was crumbled.

Confused, shaken and aghast were not enough to express Thunderkit. His eyes grew wide as cats stared at him. He was not looked at as a rogue. He was looked at as a mistake. His throat clenched and his paws fumbled in anxiety. Eventually, he could not take the eyes anymore. Thunderkit raced down the path and out of view.

Stepping into the edge of the forest, he felt against the bottom of a tree, clinging to its roots. Quiet cries developed into a powerful weeping which made him weak. Disgusted with himself, he gritted his teeth together bitterly and shut his eyes.

"Why did you leave mommy?" He whispered. "Did you want this to happen?"

After asking questions that would never be answered, he conjured a conclusion. *She doesn't love you. No one loves you.*

"Thunderkit!" A call came from afar. After a few moments in silence, the calling grew closer and a cat crossed toward him. Sitting beside him, Thunderkit struggled to ignore the cat.

"I am sorry," Grayfrost said. "I wanted to tell you many times..."

"You're not my father," Thunderkit growled.

"Thunderkit, I am your father. I loved Colette. But I also love Sorrelfoot and my kits," Grayfrost tried to explain but Thunderkit proved to be stubborn.

"I don't want you to be my father," he grumbled in reply. Grayfrost wanted to say the same but he drew back and focused on Colette. As he did, his true self returned. His love for Colette remained, within Thunderkit. The way the kit spoke, the love he had seen briefly, Colette lived on within Thunderkit.

"I am sorry Colette left. She loved another rogue," Grayfrost muttered. Whether or not it was true, was not relevant. In her last moments, Colette wanted McNaire. *Would she have truly left?* He wondered to himself. Grayfrost would never know.

"Grayfrost," Thunderkit whimpered.

"Yes?"

"Did you kill her?" Thunderkit asked, using the foreign word. His eyes locked on Grayfrost. The question took him by surprise. Thunderkit was more than he thought.

"No. Of course not. I loved her," Grayfrost replied. "I know this is hard. I will be here for you Thunderkit."

When Grayfrost was gone, Thunderkit shifted on his paws. His anger and blame had shifted, and now, his mother was to blame. A fire flamed in his gut and he frowned. *Once a rogue, always a rogue...*

# Chapter 15

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes. **Kits**: Horsekit (tom), Sandkit (she cat) and Shrewkit (she cat)

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**: Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentice**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 10 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**:

Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Horsekit- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6 moons.

Sandkit- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 6 moons.

Shewkit- light brown she cat with green eyes. 6 moons.

Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 4 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 4 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 3.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 2.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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**Rogues**:

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Sage- a dark golden tabby with pale green eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 6.5 moons old.

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Quiet. The twolegplace was utterly and suddenly quiet. No twolegs were seen, no monster was heard, and the mutts seemed to hide within their dwellings. Sage could only see it as an omen to come.

Trotting along the open path, she heard no howls or sign of McNaire behind her. She knew better. McNaire would not let himself be known without his toms. McNaire would come for her, take her and kill her. McNaire killed everyone and would continue to kill everyone.

It had been days since her escape. Yet, time felt the same. Every moment was filled with a fearful adrenaline. Sleep was a past reality, and all that remained was fear. Time moved. The moon shifted half a cycle. Still, Sage was not convinced.

She had to find a place of refuge. She yearned for a permanent home however her fear of McNaire surpassed all notions or ideas. In the chill of the night, she stumbled aimlessly through a foreign land. The twolegplace's extensive paths and dens made the area of maze of overwhelming scents and enemies. The scent of mutts was overwhelming, along with a lingering scent of cats.

Sage pushed on despite the reoccurring fears and the growing anxiety. Searching from house to house, she was following a mere murmur of a rumor. Within the twolegplace lay a haven beyond McNaire's grasp. It was in the security of a twoleg's den, but at this point, Sage would sacrifice her dignity for safety.

Her paws made a subtle and rhythm across the concrete. A pitter patter. When the sounds grew, Sage's senses were thrown into alarm. Although the danger was imminent, she could not run from the presence behind her. Sage's joints stiffened and her lungs clenched as she was enveloped in complete and utter fear. Coming to a stop, she hastily turned to meet the presence.

To her immediate relief, McNaire was not the source. Instead, a pale white tom with bright yellow eyes. He also came to a halt and their eyes met.

"Are you a survivor?" The tom asked quietly. Hesitant, Sage realized it did not matter in the end. McNaire would find her or she would reach safety. It was all up to StarClan.

"Yes."

"Come with me. My twoleg won't mind one more..."

"Thank you," Sage muttered.

"Do not thank me yet," the tom warned. Sage acknowledged this and followed his lead. Nearing a den, the tom sat at the door step and clawed. He continued to do this with swift paws, as Sage scanned the area.

Nothing stirred. Shadow encompassed most of the land. The thunderpath was illuminated by the moonlight. Eventually, vibrations and sounds within the den signaled a nearing twoleg. The tom retreated from the door and Sage turned to face it in terror.

A twoleg towered above them. Sage was surprised at its hairless nature along with its indistinguishable features. It scent was strange and hard to read. The twoleg's murmurs and sounds differed from their ways of communication.

"Let it pet and touch you. It won't send you away if it thinks your nice," he advised as he walked past the twoleg and into the house. Sage's legs stiffened and she gazed up at the twoleg. Slowly, it lowered itself down to her. It's paws wrapped around her and lifted her up. Sage made sure not to fidget as the twoleg look her over.

After a few sweet murmurs, it brought Sage into its embrace and into the den. She peered back in relief as the den's door was shut.

"All cats old enough to climb the ravine, gather amongst the rockpile!"

The leader's words sent chills through Horsekit's pelt. Looking down, he met his reflection in the narrow and shallow stream still in the surroundings of camp. Only a few tree lengths away from the

stream, they were preparing before they began their walk toward rock-pile.

Horsekit sent a quick glance to his sister beside him. Sandkit had her nose buried in her pelt, as she rasped her tongue over a stray tuft of fur. It would not stay in place and Horsekit could sense it was bothering Sandkit.

"It's fine," he said with a small smile. Sandkit looked up, finally giving up on her pelt. She returned the soft smile before meeting Horsekit's eyes.

"It's just... Shrewkit is so pretty. She looks like mom and I... I don't look like dad. I just look..." Suddenly, Sandkit shifted the direction of the discussion. "I just hope I get a good mentor. A *really good* warrior."

"You will," Horsekit encouraged. Shrewkit chuckled. It seemed their sister had heard the last part of the conversation.

"Easy for you. Your mentor is set in stone. Swampfur is the only option," Shrewkit brought up.

"At least you have an option to switch if you're unhappy. Anyone can train you. There's only one Medicine Cat," Horsekit replied. He almost shuddered at the thought. *What if Swampfur hated him? He's not gross or ugly. But he sure is bitter at times*.

"*All cats*-"

"Coming!" Shrewkit declared as she barreled toward the rocks. Horsekit chuckled and followed her, along with Sandkit. Their future awaited them.

On the highest rock amongst the rock-pile stood their mother and leader, Fernstar. Radiant and as regal as ever, Horsekit was filled with pride. He was so blessed to have such kin.

"We gather amongst the rock-pile this morning for an important milestone for three members of SkyClan. Sandkit, Shrewkit, and Horsekit have all reached six moons old and are ready to become apprentices to serve SkyClan in their individual path," Fernstar

addressed SkyClan. Scanning over the Clan, she continued. "Each cat has a unique set of talents and qualities that make them who they are. No matter your personality or appearance, you are brought here to serve SkyClan, in blood and love."

The words were moving for the three siblings, as well as Larkkit. The young she kit sat to the side, gazing in wonder at her leader. Larkkit looked up with wide and bright eyes. Fernstar's words were enlightening, and her leadership and elegance was undeniable. Larkkit admired the she cat with all her heart and would speak of her goodness with every breath. From that day forward, Larkkit's passion for SkyClan and her love for Fernstar was unmoving.

"Sandkit, step forward," Fernstar declared. As she stepped forward, Sandkit sent a final and uneasy glance to Horsekit. "Your enthusiasm and determination is evident, even now. I have no doubt in your loyalty to SkyClan and your eagerness to serve your Clan. Sandkit, do you promise to uphold the Warrior code and live for SkyClan and all who dwell under it?"

"I do."

"Then from this day forward, you shall be known as Sandpaw. To counter your personality a calm and kindred spirit, found in Windwhisker, shall mentor you."

The heavy burden was lifted off Sandpaw's shoulders. She sighed in relief. *Windwhisker is better than the grumpier toms*. Sandpaw figured quietly. *Besides, he's been a warrior for many moons and has probably trained an apprentice before*.

"Shrewkit," Fernstar interrupted idle chatter as she continued the ceremony. "Bold and fun, you certainly have a voice to share. May your spunky personality and energy affect others, for the better. Shrewkit, do you promise to serve SkyClan and uphold the warrior code?"

"I do!" She said a bit too forcefully. Following her oath, she coughed as she felt the strain within her throat. Shrewkit hastily recovered and returned her gaze to Fernstar.

"From this day forward you shall be known as Shrewpaw. To counter your personality, Firfoot shall be your mentor and lead you in your future training," Fernstar announced, smiling at her sister. Shrewpaw secretly hoped for better but was thankful she did not have Darkgorge.

"And finally, Horsekit. You interest in the Medicine Cat field was unexpected but welcomed happily. The Clan is so thankful another has found this to be their purpose and way of serving SkyClan. You shall do well. Horsekit, do you promise to uphold the warrior code at all costs, and stay true to SkyClan?"

"I do," Horsekit exhaled.

"From this day forward, Horsekit shall be known as Horsepaw. Swampfur shall mentor you well. May StarClan light your path," Fernstar smiled at her son before looking to the others. "May StarClan light all of your futures. May you three live and serve long."

"SANDPAW! SHREWPAW! HORSEPAW!" SkyClan chanted each of their names and the Clan settled. Many cats congratulated and gave their best wishes to the apprentices. After it was appropriate, the cats of SkyClan headed to enjoy a feast.

Scrambling off the rocks, Sparrowkit rushed away, leaving his mother alone with his sister. He raced to Grayfrost's flank and his eyes beamed as he began to speak with his father.

"Grayfrost..."

"Sparrowkit! How are you?"

"I am well. Grayfrost... Would you like to share a piece of prey with me?" Sparrowkit asked uneasily. Grayfrost was taken by surprise, and he smiled.

"Of course!"

The father and son made their way to the prey pile where Sparrowkit picked out a well sized rabbit. Settling amongst the rocks, the father and son began to share their piece of prey.

Grayfrost was filled with joy, as he finally had the opportunity to form a relationship with one of his kits. After Sorrelfoot and Grayfrost stopped conversing, Grayfrost stopped visiting the nursery.

Sparrowkit and Grayfrost enjoyed their time together that was delayed for many days because of s silly mistake. As he spent time with Sparrowkit, Grayfrost thought less of his mistakes and more of the great choice before him. *At least I did something right...*

Down the path, within camp, Thunderkit sat and watched silently. Deep in thought, he barely kept his composure. He was compelled with desire. *Don't look...* Thunderkit advised himself. Nevertheless, he did.

Father and son shared their prey, Grayfrost's eyes beaming with pride.  Sparrowkit's smile was wider than ever before. And Thunderkit, felt a deeper emptiness than ever before. His envy spiraled within him and his eyes narrowed on Sparrowkit.

"Thunderkit," Horsepaw muttered. "Is everything alright?"

"I made my decision," Thunderkit whispered. "Now we just have to wait."

# Chapter 16

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6 moons.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 10 moons.

Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. Mentor is Windwhisker. 6 moons.

Shrewpaw- light brown she cat with green eyes. Mentor is Firfoot. 6 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**: Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 4 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 4 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 3.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 2.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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"Ready or not, here I come!" Blackkit announced. Barreling from his spot, he began to investigate the camp, seeking those hidden. His litter mate, Turtlekit, had hidden behind the largest Boulder nearest to the apprentice den.

Unfortunately, she had not thought about her hiding spot. In the last moments she had rushed to find one. Her silver pelt helped, but she had contrasting white spots that were far too obvious.

Blackkit near her hiding spot. Anxiety ran through her toes as she slowly crept around the circle. Slowly moving with Blackkit, they circled the rock. Turtlekit had avoided her brother. Just when it seemed he might have missed her, and urge crawled up. Turtlekit sneezed.

"Haha! I found you!" Blackkit declared as he raced around to find his sister. Turtlekit sighed. From the corner of her eye, she could see Thunderkit.

The young tom was sitting higher in camp, along the path. Thunderkit was picky in what games he participated in those days, and rarely have an answer why. He had declined their request that he play Hide n'go seek with him.

"I'm going to speak with Thunderkit," Turtlekit said and Blackkit sent her a frown. As she sensed his disapproval, she said, "he's kin. And our friend."

"I'm finding the others, I'll tell you when we're done," Blackkit replied.

Dashing away, he quickly continued investigating the rocks and groves of the camp. There were so many places to hide, but Blackkit was determined to win. Turtlekit climbed up the rocks and ravine until she met Thunderkit. Panting heavily, she could barely speak.

"How... Are... You?"

"Fine," he replied plainly.

"You know you can play with us! Sparrowkit and Larkkit play with us all the time-"

"No thank you," Thunderkit muttered. "You are great though."

"*Thunderkit*! You are the greatest kit that ever lived. You conquered when we played Clans, remember? And you hit a Mossball harder

than anyone! Not to mention, everyone loves you," Turtlekit praised the older tom kit and he wrinkled his nose.

"No one loves me," he scoffed.

"No! You're my friend! And Swallowkit *really* likes you, Thunderkit! I know because sisters are close," Turtlekit smiled. Her statement made Thunderkit shift on his paws. The fact that Turtlekit viewed him as a friend, and that Swallowkit may like him, was comforting.

"Thank you, Turtlekit," he murmured.

"I can't wait until you become leader and rule the world! You would be the best! Like... Calm. Yet powerful and lovable! Like a fluffy kitten!" She giggled hysterically.

"Uh... Thanks," he replied.

"I better go see my mom! I have to tell her what we did today," she explained. "Bye Thunderkit!"

As Turtlekit headed over to her mother, she saw Shinyflower speaking with someone. Shrewpaw, recently made an apprentice, must have passed by the nursery and was speaking with Shinyflower about something important.

"Sweetheart you need to see Swampfur," Shinyflower advised strictly.

"I will! But I need to meet Firfoot by the stream," Shrewpaw argued.

"That can wait! A sickness cannot," Shinyflower whispered urgently.

"I am not sick," Shrewpaw replied. Her eyes were focused yet tired, as if she had this fight far too many times. Shrewpaw spotted Turtlekit and raced past Shinyflowr and down the path. Whipping around, Shinyflower noticed her daughter's confused expression and explain.

"Shrewpaw has a cough, that's all," her mother replied. Turtlekit nodded before she looked up at her mother.

"Okay. Mommy you won't believe what I did this morning..."

Meanwhile, outside of camp, Horsepaw strolled under the protection of the trees. Alone, without the guidance of Swampfur, he was dispatched to bring back anything that appeared to be a herb. He was to use a large ivy or oak leaf to carry them. This was his task for the entire morning.

Working since dawn, he had found some interesting roots. Each of them appeared similar, however, if he focused his scents, he could determine the slight difference. Horsepaw had also heard of poppy seeds, and ingested a few at times. He had found a couple amongst a batch of flower.

When Sandpaw had a bellyache when they were very young, Swampfur had given her three blue berries. Horsepaw recalled the time when he came upon a large patch of berries. A surplus of the blue berries grew and Horsepaw took a fair amount before he stumbled upon more herbs.

A small bush nourished only a few red berries. Careful not to ingest or harm any of the herbs, Horsepaw would would his paws and claws to shake off or claw off the herbs. He placed the red berries amongst the juniper berries and continued searching.

Herbs proved to be best found amongst the bases of huge trees or in patches and fields of plants. Different herbs clung in pairs, or at least, the ones he could find. Horsepaw did not know of the many roots and herbs that lay hidden to the cat's eye, under the soil of the earth.

When the sun was at its highest in the sky, Horsepaw collected his plentiful amount of herbs, and travelled back. He journeyed past the fields and forests and toward the ravine. Horsepaw lost himself a few times, not certain of camp's location.

Eventually, he found his way to camp in a whole new way. Through the lower woods, he emerged near the rock-pile. Horsepaw headed toward the Medicine Cat den, sending a smile to Turtlekit along the way. The she cat was very friendly to all her clanmates. Horsepaw looked toward Thunderkit, but the tom was lost in thought.

Horsepaw entered the Medicine Cat stores and dropped off the herbs. Before he left to find Swampfur, the Medicine Cat den came into the den. Swampfur greeted Horsepaw with a smile then looked toward the pile of herbs, and inspected them.

"Interesting. You found lots of berries and seeds. But the roots and leaves-" Swampfur trailed off as his paw uncovered the rest of the herbs. The red berries were visible beneath the Juniper berries, and immediately Swampfur was alarmed.

"Swampfur..."

"Horsepaw," he began. "Do you know what you found?"

"Juniper berries and-"

"You cannot tell anyone a soul what I am about to tell you," Swampfur warned. "These berries. The red ones. They are the most dangerous herb known to cats under StarClan. The berries are called death berries."

"I'm sorry I didn't-"

"No one knows. And no one can know," Swampfur said. "One berry can kill a kit and hurt a warrior. Two to three berries will kill an adult warrior, no matter their strength or size."

"Why not warn the Clan?"

"Other cats can use it against their clanmates. In prey, in medicine, in times of war or battle," Swampfur explained. Picking out the berries he dug a small hole in the corner of the den, and placed them in the hole. "These berries are dangerous. It is a burden a Medicine Cat has to know and protect. You must never, let these berries out of your sight. Whenever you come upon them. *Bury them*."

Horsepaw watched silently as he covered the small hole. Swampfur had placed the dirt over all the herbs he had collected. All of his work was ruined.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, Swampfur."

Swampfur left the herb stores, making his way into the Medicine cat den. Only a few moments passed before there was commotion, just in the neighboring den. Making his way into the den, he was instantly alarmed. The smell of blood hung in the stuffy air, and the groans of someone inside were evident. Horsepaw raced inside to see Seampfur bent over Darkgorge, bloody and wounded. Beside him, Honeypaw stood looking over Darkgorge. The two had just returned from wherever Darkgorge had endured the wounds.

"What happened? All of it!" Swampfur instructed sternly.

"McNaire. I was patrolling with Yellowbird, Darkgorge and Honeypaw along the northern border. He attacked me and asked me about Sage. Then, he left," Darkgorge explained all the while fighting through the pain. His fangs were gritted and he tried to keep his eyes shut. Perhaps the sight of defeat was too unbearable for him.

"Horsepaw! Hold this leaf on the wound," Swampfur said. "I will be right back, I have to get goldenrod.."

Horsepaw did as instructed and pressed it against the wound. As he did, Darkgorge winced and the apprentice felt bad. The elder warrior noticed this and chuckled.

"Keep it there, kid."

"Does it hurt?" Horsepaw asked. Immediately, the young tom felt stupid for asking the question. Darkgorge rolled his eyes.

"It hurts. But I'm still here," Darkgorge retorted. "Honeypaw and Yellowbird carried me back to camp. If I was alone, I would have been vulture's prey."

Darkgorge's words made Horsepaw think of his journey. Only a few moments ago, he was alone and unprotected. *What if McNaire had found him?* The thought sent shudders through Horsepaw. At any moment, the scariest and most dangerous tom that ever lived, could leap out from the bushes and slaughter him. The fear was

paralyzing for the young apprentice.

"I found it," Swampfur announced as he re-entered the den. "Horsepaw, see if you can find Fernstar or Grayfrost. If not, wait for them."

"What about-"

"I got it. I need you to inform our leader," Swampfur instructed. Horsepaw nodded and left the den, heading to find authority.

# Chapter 17

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6 moons.

**Warriors**:
Darkgorge- a dark gray long furred tom with amber eyes.

Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 10 moons.

Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. Mentor is Windwhisker. 6 moons.

Shrewpaw- light brown she cat with green eyes. Mentor is Firfoot. 6 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**: Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 4 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 4 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 3.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 2.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 2.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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Later in the night, Swampfur scrambled to stop Darkgorge's bleeding. He scavenged all the herbs he could find from the medicine cat den. Thanks to Horsepaw's assistance, they found goldenrod within the deep grooves of the herb stores. What little was left, Swampfur used for Darkgorge.

The senior Warrior had taken a lethal wound to the flank, that stretched toward his belly. The claws of McNaire had inflicted a deep gash revealed the pierced flesh. Profuse bleeding kept Swampfur from investigating how deep it spanned. However, he speculated the worse and imagined it must have pierced a nearby organ, which would explain Darkgorge's unstable condition and bleeding.

Despite all of Swampfur's efforts, the wound resisted efforts to heal it. A dark  scarlett pool grew around the tom and soon, Swampfur's dark pelt was caked with the blood of his patient. Swampfur was drenched in his blood, from his paws to his whiskers. Horsepaw used moss to help clean the area, yet it soon returned to its bloody state.

"Swampfur... I can't find any-"

"It's a weed!" Swampfur snapped.

"I'm sorry," Horsepaw apologized. "There is no more left. It must have been used when Ryepelt was injured..."

Swampfur sighed, stepping away from Darkgorge and looking down at his paws. He was shocked at the sight of his paws. The elders never tell kits of how much blood Medicine Cats will have in their paws. A Warrior's paws should be bloody with the catch of the day, or with the fur of their enemies. Never should a Medicine Cat or Warrior, have their paws drenched in the blood of their Clan.

The decision was difficult. Looking to Horsepaw, he walked toward the tom.

"Go sleep," Swampfur instructed.

"What if you need my help, the apprentice's den is a tree-length away," Horsepaw argued, fearing the worst for Darkgorge.

"*Go*."

"Yes, Swampfur," he replied obediently. Swampfur watched his apprentice leave the Medicine cat den, making sure he was tail-lengths away before he turned to Darkgorge.

Reaching the injured tom, he placed his paw on him gently. Shaking him slightly, he woke Darkgorge.

"Darkgorge," Swampfur began. "I am going to fetch your kin. Let you say goodbye."

The senior warrior took a moment, his mind drifting elsewhere. Swampfur could sense the sheer pain he tried to ignore. "So this is it."

"I am afraid so," Swampfur replied.

Leaving Darkgorge for a few moments, Swampfur left the den and made his way toward the Warrior's den. He ventured up the rocky path and entered the den. There, he found Grayfrost and Shrikeclaw, who he quietly sent to the Medicine Cat den. Next, he made his way to the nursery where he found Shinyflower. Her three kits were piled around the she cat, which made waking the mother extremely difficult.

"Mommy..."

"I'll be right back," Shinyflower whispered.

Swallowkit's eyes shot open as her mother swiftly left the nursery. Turtlekit and Blackkit were heavy sleeps, and therefore, did not mind. However, Swallowkit was not the same. A bundle of anxiety filled her belly. The thought of sleeping while her mother was away, was terrifying. *What if something happens? What does Swampfur need her for?*

When Shinyflower was gone, Swallowkit shot up from her sleeping position and glanced around frantically. She did not wish to disturb her siblings or Sorrelfoot and her kits. In a delightful surprise, she found Thunderkit was awake, his eyes wide open, staring into the darkness.

Slowly, Swallowkit crawled over to Thunderkit. Careful and light on her paws, she was very cautious not to wake anyone. She scooted toward Thunderkit and wiggled beside the young tom kit. Only a moon older, Thunderkit was massive for his age, even if half of it

was his thick pelt.

"Thunderkit," she squeaked. Thunderkit shifted and his head whirled to face her, his eyes narrowed in confusion. Smiling Swallowkit looked him in the eye.

"I couldn't sleep. My mother is gone and I'm scared," she explained. "Why can't you sleep?"

"I don't sleep," Thunderkit muttered.

"Why not?"

"I don't sleep. Not since my mother left," Thunderkit whispered in reply. Swallowkit's eyes widened at the comment. The young she cat did not remember it well, she only knew that Colette left and did not return.

"I am sorry," she said.

"Don't be. It's not your fault," he retorted a bit bitterly. Swallowkit noticed the discomfort and angst within his tone.

"I don't like being alone either," Swallowkit remarked.

"You're never alone," Thunderkit countered. "You have Blackkit, Turtlekit and Shinyflower..."

"Just because they are here doesn't mean I don't feel alone sometimes. Besides, I don't have a father."

"What?"

"I don't have a father," Swallowkit repeated. "Shinyflower never tells us anything about our father. At least you know who your father is."

Silence overcame the two kits as they peered into the darkness. The subtle breathing of the others was rhythmic and somewhat soothing in a way. Thunderkit was drowsy yet his eyes were peeled open and locked on the entrance of the nursery.

"Thunderkit..."

"Yes?"

"Try to go to sleep," Swallowkit said.

"Or what?" Thunderkit grinned. The younger she cat came to her paws and jabbed one into his side playfully. A though came to her mind and she smiled.

"If you try to sleep, I'll be your Queen someday!" Swallowkit declared.

"What! You're joking," Thunderkit scoffed.

"No! I promise!" Swallowkit declared. "I'll be your Queen someday and you'll be leader. And our kits will know their father and mother. And we will never leave them."

"I don't want a queen or kits," Thunderkit retorted. "Especially not you!"

"Just wait. One day you will," Swallowkit smiled as she returned to her brother and sisters.

Thunderkit averted his eyes from the entrance, only a few moments. Watching Swallowkit as she took her places amongst her siblings and went back to sleep. The thought of someday having a queen was new. Though, the thought did send a level of excitement through him. A challenge had been placed in his mind. *I will be a better leader and father than any cat*. Thunderkit vowed that his kits would be able to sleep at night.

Glaring to the left of him, Thunderkit's eyes momentarily rested on Sparrowkit and Larkkit. Curled up and sleeping close to Sorrelfoot, the three appeared warm and comfortable. Thunderkit envied the warmth that radiated off the three and tempted him from afar. One day, he wouldn't be cold. One day, he wouldn't need to envy others. But that day, was many moons away.

Within the Medicine Cat den, the offering of Darkgorge had gathered to say their final goodbyes. Strangely, Darkgorge had retained the strength to request that Swampfur leave the den for a few moments. The Medicine cat was obedient and left, deciding to

take the time to mediate.

"Father," Grayfrost tried to say when Darkgorge cut him off.

"*Shut up*."

Ever since Fernstar exposed Grayfrost's treasonous affair with Colette, Darkgorge had viewed his son as a disgrace. Grayfrost although deputy, was nothing more than an outcast in his eyes.

"It is my turn," Darkgorge said gruffly. "For moons I have raised you three I deserve this for all the trouble you put me through."

His bitter tone was icy, however the three were used to their father. Darkgorge did not show affection or love, only the occasionally disdain for all he found inferior. Shrikeclaw and Grayfrost came to respect their father for his constant loyalty and hard work. Shinyflower, on the other hand, resented the old tom and believed his good mind had left him ages ago.

"You may have disgraced your name, Grayfrost. Or you, Shrikeclaw, having Honeypaw with a rogue then taking Shinyflower's future. All the same, you have made steps toward the future of our kin," Darkgorge said. "Times have changed. As long as tortoiseshells are in power, nothing will ever be right. Take it back with your children and make SkyClan what it used to be."

Shinyflower turned away as she scowled. She didn't wish to argue with her father before he took his last breath. Instead, she stormed out of the Medicine Cat den and began her way back to the nursery. Shrikeclaw caught up with her, quickly, calling after her.

"*Shinyflower*!" Shrikeclaw called for the final time before she whipped around to face her brother.

"What!"

"What's wrong?"

"Our father is insane and wrong," Shinyflower declared boldly.

"Our father is a great warrior-"

"He is a crazy fool. He is evil and I am glad he is finally dead," Shinyflower spat. Shrikeclaw stood frozen and he uttered no word.

# Chapter 18

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 7 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

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**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 11 moons.

Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. Mentor is Windwhisker. 7 moons.

Shrewpaw- light brown she cat with green eyes. Mentor is Firfoot. 7 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**: Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 5 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 5 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 4.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 3.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 3.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 3.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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"Fernstar," Horsepaw murmured. Peering inside the den, he could only the the silhouette of his mother. She was crouched and silent, but he could sense the tension.

"Fernstar," he repeated. The leader was alone. Ryepelt, her mate, had been on patrols constantly, trying to distract himself. Horsepaw worried for Fernstar as she sat alone in the dark. At a time like this, she needed to be with those closest to her. She needed the support

of the Clan.

"Mother!" He finally said, barging into her den. She rose her head slightly, but made no further action.

"You may speak. Address me as Fernstar," she retorted bitterly.

"Fernstar, Swampfur has given up. He won't talk to me. He won't give me guidance. Swampfur clings to Sky's Den. I need his help mother or I can't save Shrewpaw," Horsepaw explained. Yearning for any sort of guidance, he sat there for many moments. He was not afraid to challenge his mother or anyone else. Shrewpaw's life was on the line and the SkyClan was counting on him.

"Save her," Fernstar muttered, trying to hold herself together. Her beloved daughter had fallen into a state of comatose, the previous day during a hunting trip. The thought made her throat clench and her body weak with fear and desperation.

After Darkgorge's death, SkyClan was faring well. Any trance of rogues or McNaire did not exist. Silverclaw and Sunnystripe were in good health. Shrewpaw had a common cold which she continually took herbs for. Her recovery was almost finished when she dropped unconscious the previous day during training.

The shock had impacted the entire Clan. Many were devastated and unable to perform normal duties. Others used their Warrior duties to cope. Grayfrost and Ryepelt were committed and dispatched to keep patrols of all kinds a float.

Eventually, Horsepaw left the leader's den and rushed back toward the Medicine Cat den. He had lost all patience with his mother and Swampfur. Both of them were Kim yet they left him in the moment of utmost need. Horsepaw was halted by a familiar face during his return.

Sandpaw stood before him. Her light golden pelt was short yet thick, baring resemblance to her father, Ryepelt. Upon catching sight of Horsepaw, she immediately began to question him.

"Is she okay! Horsepaw, why were you speaking to mom!"

"Sandpaw," Horsepaw said in a warning tone. Their eyes met and Sandpaw could tell by his expression, Shrewpaw was in worse condition than she thought.

"*Horsepaw*, you have to help her," Sandpaw pleaded.

"I'm trying!" Horsepaw snapped. Taken aback, Sandpaw turned away. Altering his tone, he repeated, "I'm trying."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Swampfur is gone. He won't help. Fernstar is too. I don't have the cats I need."

"I'll help you," Sandpaw proposed. "*Listen*, Swampfur hasn't cured this yet. But you're trying. Maybe you can do something he can't."

Horsepaw looked away from his litter mate. Sandpaw believed in him. Yet at the same time, Sandpaw would do anything for their sister, Shrewpaw. *I can't let them down*. He decided then and there.

"I'll do it," Horsepaw told her as their eyes met. "I promise."

"What can I do?" Sandpaw asked pleadingly.

"Talk with Silverclaw, quickly. He's not doing well either but he can still talk. I need you to ask him how it started. How he's been fairing all this time?"

"I'll do that! What about you?"

"I am going to find the cure," Horsepaw replied.

The sense of urgency dawned on both of them. Sandpaw dashed off in search of Swampfur as Horsepaw made his way back to the Medicine Cat den. It seemed lonely and unattended. The Clan avoided the den as it was Swampfur's last request before gave up. Shrewpaw's illness had sent the fear of all the power of the stars and sky into the hearts and minds of the Clan. Before, it was a mere illness that affected elders. Now, it targeted a she cat of only seven moons.

Entering the medicine cat den, the pungent smell of sweat and sickness was overwhelming. A tinge of blood hung in the air as fresh blood formed in the she cat's throat. The illness began with minor coughs, then progressed and became more powerful. The coughing would continue as the cats became weaker and found it harder to breath. As their bodies became weak, it completely overcame them. In the victims final days, they would cough up portions of blood at a time and they could not eat or ingest anything as it was too painful.

Swampfur had investigated this with difficulty, and believed it to have no cure. Horsepaw however, was a new apprentice only have tried for about a moon. The young tom felt he had no choice, as it was his duty to save every cat in his care, especially his sister.

Glancing over his sister, Horsepaw felt his belly churn in apprehension. The challenge burned within him. He felt the unbearable weight of the responsibility of the life that laid before him. Taking the wet moss leftover, he dribbled the droplets over her head, trying to wake the she cat. If she could not wake, she could not take herbs, and would not survive.

Moments went by with no reply. Horsepaw fidgeted as he waited to the side, gently prodding her with his paw to wake. Eventually, his efforts and patience paid off. Shrewpaw's eyes open gradually and she moaned in pain. It was followed by an awful series of coughs.

"Shrewpaw..." Horsepaw muttered. Although she did not reply, she acknowledged his presence.

"Don't try to speak. I will get you lavender," Horsepaw said, taking off for the herb stores. The young Medicine cat quickly investigated the herbs and plucked out the distinct lavender. He then returned to Shrewpaw's side and gave her the lavender to ingest.

While the herb was settling, Horsepaw scrambled over to the Medicine Cat stores. Filled with herbs, there were so many he was not quite familiar with. Horsepaw was not confident he could properly identify all the herbs.

As he speculated the proper approach, he heard his name being

called. Returning the call, he was soon greeted by Sandpaw. The she cat had raced to and from the sky's den, a long way from the medicine cat den.

"Swampfur said... Coltsfoot and Chickweed don't work. Neither do that basic remedies for Greencough and Whitecough," Sandpaw informed him. Horsepaw frowned at the information but quickly got back on task.

"Thank you. Take this lavender to Silverclaw, then these Juniper berries and two poppy seeds to Fernstar-"

"Can I see Shrewpaw?"

"*Sandpaw*. I have to get to work."

"I understand," she said in a state of melancholy. "I'll go do that."

Horsepaw glanced over the herbs quickly making calculations and scenarios in his mind. *Why wouldn't catmint work?* It puzzled him. Shrewpaw had been taking treatments of catmint and other forms and it had worked for a short time. However, the catmint did not cure the sickness. Scanning over the roots, he came up with an idea. *I have to try it.* He encouraged himself. His idea was far from what Swampfur had told him.

Taking the roots, he investigated them with narrowed eyes. He gently picked up Chervile root and Burdock root in his jaw, and carried them to the Medicine Cat den, connected to the herb stores.

"Horsepaw," Shrewpaw murmured with what strength she had.

"Don't talk-"

"No... *Horsepaw*," she struggled to speak. For some reason, Horsepaw felt it was important to listen and so he did. "I did something."

"What do you mean? What did you do?"

"I caught a bird. Drinking by a stream. I ate it and now StarClan is punishing me," Shrewpaw whimpered at the thought but she had no

tears to spare. Instead, she hacked until a clot of blood came up.

"Shrewpaw, that makes no sense-"

"I'm sorry Horsepaw," she murmured. Her eyes shifted closed and Horsepaw was thrown into panic. Beside him were the herbs he had carried over, he quickly took the closest root and gave it to Shrewpaw.

"Hurry. Eat this," Horsepaw instructed.  He chewed up the root for her so that she could invest the herb. Once she did, she lost consciousness once more.

Forcing himself to step away, Horsepaw left to his own nest. Stricken with anxiety and burdened with uncertainty, he prayed that he did not take away her life. Falling into his nest, he looked up in pain.

"Please show me guidance. *Please,"* Horsepaw whispered to the stars. Out of view, he felt more alone than ever. "Please! Someone help me!"

As soon as his cry rang throughout the den, his eyes began to blur and he was overcome by darkness. He wanted to scream out in alarm, but his words did not go anywhere. Instead, he was comforted by voice.

"*Horsepaw*..." StarClan had heard his call.

"Wait, is that you? *Gingertail*?" Horsepaw recognized the voice of his mother's mother almost immediately. The elder she cat had passed due to the disease.

"Sweetheart, do not be afraid. Challenges lie before us each day. You will learn to overcome them," Gimgertail explained with a soothing tone.

"Will I save Shrewpaw then? Will she be saved?" He questioned hastily. A sigh came front Gingertail's voice and Horsepaw stiffened at this. "StarClan won't let her die."

"Careful Horsepaw. No cat is immune to death or fate. You cannot

change it," Gingertail advised.

"Let me go! I have to save her!"

"Horsepaw," Gingertail said sternly. "You will face hardships. I cannot imagine the pain you will endure in the future moons. Stay strong. *Stay good*."

"Gingertail!"

Horsepaw's clear eyesight returned. Wasting no time, he raced over to Shrewpaw's side where the she cat blinked faintly. She was awake, but barely holding on.

"Shrewpaw," Horsepaw whispered.

"Horsepaw," she whimpered. "It's burns. My chest-"

"I'll get you some Celandine for the pain," Horsepaw replied. Before he could deliver the herb, Shrewpaw's green eyes rolled back and her chest stopped heaving for air. There was nothing more Horsepaw could do.

# Chapter 19

[image]

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**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

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---

"Firfoot, are you certain it was here?"

"Yes," the she cat replied. With somber eyes she scanned the area around the stream. "It's good hunting here. My mentor used to take me here."

Horsepaw's eyes lifted up and he glanced over the area. The stream seemed to supply fertile life around it, as the shoots of saplings were abundant, and the trees along the tree still maintained their green leaves even though leaf-bare was near.

The chill of the air laid on their pelts, yet the plants did not seem to mind. While other parts of the forest turned to shades of the flame, the area before Horsepaw stood, frozen in time. The young apprentice could only attribute the strong and constant flow of the stream with the unusual patch of the forest. *Perhaps the stream keeps it alive...*

The smooth stones shaped the riverbed which flowed with water. The stream's current was fierce and stronger than other streams amongst the SkyClan territory. However, Its tint was different from other streams on SkyClan territory. The water's hue was not as clear as the streams closest to camp.

"Firfoot, do you hunt here often?"

"I did when I was training Shrewpaw. I haven't since-" Firfoot stopped herself and took a breath. It was far too painful to dwell on, and neither cat wanted to.

"If this is a good place to hunt, why isn't there any prey?" Horsepaw speculated as he looked over the area. He was no hunter, but he could sense the presence of prey, big or small. Even near camp, birds and tiny mice burrowed amongst the ravine.

"Perhaps we scared them away," Firfoot said. Horsepaw acknowledged her guess but was not confident. *Near leaf-bare, prey flock to fertile grounds. Why not now?* He thought to himself.

"I don't think so," Horsepaw retorted before he took action. He found his way down to the stream, and inspected the surface of its water.

Horsepaw inhaled the scent that came with the current of the stream. An unknown stenc questioned his nose. The scent was abnormal yet equally awful to his senses. As he did, a tiny shape shimmered underneath the water. Careful not to ingest the water, he scooped up the thing with his paw. Horsepaw was shocked as he saw a tiny aquatic worm, a parasite.

"What is it?"

"*Firfoot*," he mumbled as he tried to comprehend the discovery. "Firfoot, this is the source of the sickness. Shrewpaw drank from this stream and ate the prey around it. Whatever she caught drank from the stream's water and was infected! It must have been the same with the elders, this used to be good hunting grounds, correct?"

"Yes. Sometimes my patrol and I would come over here and get something for the elders," Firfoot explained. In realization, the she cat dropped her eyes to her paws. "What have I done?"

"You have saved SkyClan," Horsepaw replied earnestly. "Firfoot, as soon as we get back to camp, notify Fernstar. Do not let anyone hunt or catch anything in this area, it's too dangerous."

As Horsepaw explained this to Firfoot, she inhaled the scents along the stream. A familiar tangy smell of something familiar clawed at Firfoot's nose. It was on the tip of her tongue but she could not be sure.

"Horsepaw, I think I know what it is," Firfoot admitted.

"Worms right?"

"No. There's more," Firfoot said as she tried to recall the scent. Horsepaw began trotting up the stream. "What are you doing?"

"Up the stream, something has had to cause this," Horsepaw replied.

"*Wait*. I will investigate it. There's no telling what's up the stream," Firfoot explained. Horsepaw nodded, although he remained concerned. The last thing he wanted was to send Firfoot into danger. "I will be as quick as possible."

"Thank you-"

"Wait, Horsepaw!" Firfoot cut him off as he was leaving. Coming to a halt he faced Firfoot. Horsepaw noticed a different concern within Firfoot's eyes.

"Have you spoken with your mother? Since Shrewpaw."

"No," Horsepaw replied. "She's been too busy."

"We both know that's a lie," Firfoot scoffed.

"It's not. She's on patrols all the time and when she's at camp she avoids me," Horsepaw tried to explain. In the days since his sister's death, he had made attempts to repair the relationship between his mother and him. Unfortunately, his attempts came to no avail.

"What about Sandpaw?" She asked. Horsepaw held his tongue and turned away.

"I need to get back to camp," he muttered before he took off. Firfoot watched in pity as the young tom dashed away. She planned to speak to her sister over the matter.

Horsepaw reached camp by noon, where cats were scattered across camp enjoying their prey. The young apprentice could not bring himself to join the regular meal. He feared that the prey upon the fresh kill could harm or infect another clanmate.

He made his way toward the medicine cat den, averting his eyes from his kin. Sandpaw sat amongst the rockpile, eating a mouse. He yearned to reconnect with his sister and hesitated. Before he reached a decision on the matter, his train of thought was interrupted.

"Horsepaw, I've been meaning to speak with you," Ryepelt said abruptly. Whipping around, Horsepaw faced his father with wide and surprised eyes.

"Father? Oh... Hi," he mumbled. Conversations with his mother and father were rare, especially with his father. Calm and collected was Ryepelt's way. Horsepaw was still trying to process the surprise.

"I'm sorry did I interrupt something?"

"No! No, I just got back from herb stuff," Horsepaw replied uncomfortably. His words fumbled and he could not think of anything to say. Horsepaw had yearned to have a conversation alone with his father for moons. Now that he finally had the moment with Ryepelt, he could barely function.

"How are you since your sister's passing?" Ryepelt asked slowly.

"I'm fine," Horsepaw lied. "I'm just really busy and I don't have much time to think about it..."

"How are you, really?" Ryepelt asked again. The way Ryepelt read others was a bit unusual, in a comforting way. Horsepaw never expected to speak with anyone about her death. Even to Thunderkit, it would be strange.

"I feel bad. Fernstar won't talk to me. Swampfur has slept at Sky's den and Sandpaw..."

"She blames you?"

"More than that," Horsepaw muttered. "*She*... She thought I could do it. She thought I could save Shrewpaw and I didn't. And she's right."

"You are both so young. Your sister is more young minded than you and doesn't understand the role and abilities of a Medicine Cat. For anyone to expect you to surpass this difficult feat, is absurd," Ryepelt explained in utmost seriousness. His words were comforting, but it didn't lessen the pain of Shrewpaw's death.

"I just wish she didn't get sick. Everything would have been fine if-"

"Horsepaw," Ryepelt began. "You can't speculate and try to rationalize what could have been. Fate and destiny will always exist. You have to trust StarClan."

"What if it could have been changed!" Horsepaw struggled to understand. *Why would StarClan want Shrewpaw to die? Why would StarClan want my mother and sister to hate me? Why does StarClan want me to suffer?*

"You cannot change what is to be. You cannot question what you cannot comprehend," Ryepelt answered simply. "Everything is written in the stars. Before you were born."

Horsepaw looked down at his paws in silence. It pained him to contemplate the unknown but he hated not understanding. *Why?* He kept asking himself in reptile. Why?

"Would you like me to speak with Fernstar?"

"No," Horsepaw hastily replied. "I'll be fine... Thank you."

"I'm sorry it took me so long," Ryepelt apologized. "We'll talk again soon."

In a nest made of grass, moss and fur laid Silverclaw. The elder was awake, sitting before a squirrel. Narrowing his eyes, he gently licked it with his tongue before his nose scrunched and he growled. In the midst of frustration, Silverclaw barely noticed Horsepaw enter the Medicine Cat den.

"Do you have an appetite?"

"Yes... Err, no," Silverclaw mumbled. "I have eaten a squirrel every noon for moons. I want this squirrel..."

"Silverclaw, can you tell me anything about the prey you eat?" Horsepaw asked curiously.

"What kind of question is that?"

"It's... Silverclaw, I have reason to believe the source of the sickness is coming from a stream. Transferred by prey and the water," Horsepaw revealed, hoping it would help Silverclaw to recall some vital information.

"Hmm, really?"

"Yes. I found a small worm in the stream. And there's no prey around there anymore," Horsepaw pointed out.

"That sounds a lot like the rats."

"What! What's that?" Horsepaw exclaimed.

"Oh boy," Silverclaw murmured. "Your mother didn't teach you much did she? Rats look like huge mice. But they are not boy. They have poisonous fangs that infect their prey and enemies with disease."

"How do you know this?" Horsepaw questioned quickly.

"SkyClan has been dealing with rats for years. The only reason we haven't in the past moons is because the twolegplace was taken by rogues. That's where most of them dung crawlers are," Silverclaw remarked with disdain.

"They cause disease?"

"Yes! They live in disease," Silverclaw said. "Swampfur has herbs dedicated to rat wounds alone."

"Wait. What kind of herbs?"

"Uh... Burdock root? That's the only one I can remember. As an apprentice I had to go find it all the time for the Medicine Cat when he was without an apprentice."

"Silverclaw, you are a genius!" Horsepaw exclaimed.

"You kits take us elders for granted-"

"How about we try some herbs? Find a cure maybe?" Horsepaw suggested.

"Go ahead, I'll just sit here," the elder replied. "I'm surprised though. Didn't Swampfur gave up?"

"Swampfur's an awful Medicine Cat," Horsepaw scoffed in reply. The young apprentice crossed the den, examining the herbs from the other night. *Lavender. Tandy. Chervile root. And Burdock root...* By coincidence, it was the exact herb Silverclaw mentioned to relate to rats.

Frowning, Horsepaw began to understand why Swampfur did not try it. Burdock root and Chervile root were used on wounds to prevent infection, not cure internal sickness. Nevertheless, the relation between Burdock root and rats gave Horsepaw an epiphany. *Perhaps when ingested, it could fight the infection from within... And with Lavender and Tansy used, they could help take away the cough and strain.*

*What didn't it work with Shrewpaw?* Gazing over the herbs, he noted the similarity in appearance between the Chervile and Burdock roots. He made the connection and cursed himself. *I must have used Chervile root instead of Burdock root*. Now that he recalled that night, he clearly remembered fetching whatever root was nearest, not the Burdock root.

Grabbing the lavender, Burdock root and tansy, he crossed over to Silverclaw. Beginning with the lavender, he gave the herb to Silverclaw. Next, he gave Silverclaw the burdock root. Silverclaw grimaced at the taste but with stern orders, ingested it all. And finally, Horsepaw gave the elder the tansy, hoping it would end the coughs for good.

"How are you feeling?" Horsepaw asked immediately. Chewing on the tansy, Silverclaw frowned. Silverclaw swallowed the tansy and met Horsepaw's expression.

"Same," he grumbled.

"Take a nap. Don't eat the squirrel yet," Horsepaw ordered before he dashed out of the den.

Racing across camp, he leaped over those eating prey and pushed past those chatting. Even Fernstar was alarmed by his sudden burst of action. He stumbled and tripped a few times on the steep rocks, due to his speed. Horsepaw's paws collided with the rough pebbles and stones of the ravine. Out of breath and burdened with sore paws, he reached Sky's den. He quickly managed to spot Swampfur.

The tortoiseshell tom sat at the bottom of the huge boulder, nestled in its rocks. Hearing Horsepaw's entrance, Swampfur whipped around.

"What are you doing here?" Swampfur questioned with narrowed eyes.

"You were wrong," Horsepaw panted.

"What?"

"You were wrong," he repeated. "It's not a plague from StarClan. It's

not incurable."

"What do you mean?" Swampfur asked, his green eyes wide with interest.

"There's worms and disease in one of our streams. It's rats. Transferred by the water and prey," Horsepaw explained briefly and quickly.

"What'd you use?"

"I had Silverclaw ingest Lavender, Burdock root, and Tansy," Horsepaw recalled briefly. Swampfur studied Horsepaw's expression and the gleam of victory in his eyes. Snickering at the young tom, Swampfur contemplated his next words. *He's stubborn.*

"Good work," Swampfur replied simply. The relief Horsepaw had was evident but Swampfur would not let him forget reality. "Now we wait."

"For what?" Horsepaw asked.

"For Silverclaw to die."

"He won't. StarClan wont allow it," the apprentice stated adamantly. Swampfur narrowed his eyes and looked Horsepaw in the eyes.

"StarClan doesn't care," Swampfur scoffed. The Medicine cat stalked away, returning to camp. Horsepaw stood frozen, left behind at Sky's den. Although he argued for StarClan, his faith was fleeting. *Does StarClan care?*

# Chapter 20

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 8 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

**Apprentices**:
Honeypaw- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey. Mentor is Yellowbird. 12 moons.

Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. Mentor is Windwhisker. 8 moons.

**Queens**:
Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes. **Kits**: Larkkit (she cat), and Sparrowkit (Tom)

Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Larkkit- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 6 moons.

Sparrowkit- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 6 moons.

Thunderkit- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 5.5 moons.

Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 4.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 4.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 4.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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Early in the morning, dawn slowly crept upon the ravine. The sun's rays slowly shed light on the camp made from stone. Turtlekit and Swallowkit played ferociously amongst the lower rocks of the ravine. Nearby, their brother, Blackkit rolled in the sand and dust of the ravine. Up the path, far from the kits, others prepared for the important day ahead.

Within the nursery, Sorrelfoot was wide awake. Her eyes inspected her daughter and every little hair on her gray tabby pelt. Even though Sorrelfoot was meticulous at times, a single look over was all she needed. Savoring a mother's satisfaction and pride,

Sorrelfoot's eyes lingered longer.

"Fernstar always makes an oath, as you know. How do you reply?" Sorrelfoot asked with a small grin.

"I reply, I do."

"With an appropriate volume and tone," Sorrelfoot added on. "If you sound like a kit, your mentor will treat you like one."

Taking a brief sigh, Larkkit's eyes met her mother's. Hopeful and filled with excitement she calmly asked, "Is Fernstar my mentor?"

"Hush," Sorrelfoot insisted giving the nursery a quick glance over. "I have spoken with her and given her my request, but it is not for certain until the ceremony. Don't say anything-"

"I won't," Larkkit promised her mother. The young she cat had dreamed of being apprenticed by her leader and hoped for it to fulfill her hopes for the future. Cats apprenticed by leaders and deputies went on to do great things.

"Will you wake up your brother?" Sorrelfoot asked. She tilted her head toward Sparrowkit, sleeping away in his nest.

As Larkkit went over to wake her brother, Sorrelfoot spotted another sleeping body. In the dark corner of the nursery, Thunderkit slept quietly. Thunderkit was the only other one within the nursery, since Shinyflower and her kits had left earlier in the morning. The motherless kit was unkept and still sleeping.

"Thunderkit," Sorrelfoot said discreetly. Nudging the kit, he drowsily began to wake. "*Thunderkit wake up*."

"Mother," he murmured subconsciously.

"I'm not your mother," she snapped abruptly. Remembering Colette set Sorrelfoot on edge and she became more irritable. "Get out and get out of the nursery. This day is important for some of us."

Alarmed at her tone, Thunderkit was wide awake. Coming to his paws, he replied. "Of course. I am leaving." Thunderkit slipped

away with their eyes upon him. As soon as he was out the door, Sparrowkit scowled.

"He never learns!"

"He never will. Don't be surprised Sparrowkit, he's a rogue," Larkkit retorted sharply.

"Hush. Both of you," Sorrelfoot demanded.

"What'd I do?" Sparrowkit whined.

"Focus in the ceremony," Sorrelfoot simply said. "Afterwards make sure you both are courteous. You need to thank your leader and anyone who congratulates you."

"Yes mother," they replied in unison.

"Be prepared. She will call for the Clan soon," Sorrelfoot addressed the two. Larkkit and Sparrowkit shared an excited glance before they calmly exited the nursery.

The excitement and exhilaration of what was ahead sent tingles down their toes and took their minds off things. Sparrowkit no longer worried about the absence of his father. And Larkkit was no longer eager for attention and praise. Neither of the young cats worried about their father's love for Thunderkit. As Fernstar's voice echoed through camp, that is all they were focused on.

"All SkyClan gather amongst the rockpile!" Fernstar called out to the members of SkyClan. The dawn patrols were off set back so that the entire Clan would be present for the Clan meeting.

Gradually the clan cats gathered around, each taking their place. Honeypaw stood near the front of the crowd. Grief for Shrewpaw's death had delayed Honeypaw's warriorship by a few moons. Sparrowkit and Larkkit quickly made their ways to the front of the crowd, while Sorrelfoot slipped behind them.

"As you know, the past moons have been difficult. But, Leaf-bare has only just begun. It will take all of our energy and faith in StarClan to surpass this leaf-bare. Disease and rogues will always be

threats. But, we shall rise above them. The poisonous stream is frozen, and rats at its source will perish within time. McNaire has not been seen for a moon. Perhaps the tom has finally met his demise. Whatever the threat may be, SkyClan will conquer it," Fernstar declared.

Howls and cheers echoed from the mouths of the Warriors. Every cat young and old was filled with pride in SkyClan. Even Thunderkit, found himself cheering with their leader.

"But today, we gather not to dwell on our enemies, but on the achievements of our clan-mates. Honeypaw, step forward," Fernstar said in accordance with tradition. The she cat stepped forward with a wide smile upon her face. "It is time for you to become a Warrior of SkyClan. Honeypaw, do you promise to uphold the Warrior code and pledge loyalty to SkyClan until you die?"

"I do."

"From this day forward you shall be known as Honeynose. May your courage, perseverance and determination be displayed in everything you do," Fernstar declared. Following this, Honeynose's new name was chanted by her clan mates.

"That is not all. Sparrowkit, step forward." The young tom grinned and stepped forward away from his sister. Looking up at Fernstar, he tried to contain his excitement with a sly smirk.

"Do you promise to uphold the Warrior code as you prepare to become a full fledged member of this clan?"

"I do," Sparrowkit replied, a little more enthusiastic than his mother liked.

"From this day forward your name shall be Sparrowpaw. You have taken great strides to prepare yourself for the challenges of being a Warrior. To continue and perfect your preparation, your mentor shall be Shrikeclaw," Fernstar declared. Sparrowpaw was not phased by the choice, but his mother bristled in anger. Sorrelfoot glanced at the ground, speculating why Fernstar did not follow her request. *Why would Grayfrost not be his mentor? A father should*

*mentor his son. He is the best choice. The only choice*.

Sorrelfoot's mind returned to the present when Fernstar spoke again. "Larkkit, step forward please."

Sorrelfoot's eyes changed from confusion to admiration as she watched her daughter take her steps forward. Filled with elegance and poise, Larkkit exemplified all that a daughter and young she cat should. Sorrelfoot could feel nothing but pride.

"Do you promise to uphold the Warrior code as you prepare for the challenges of a Warrior?" Fernstar asked.

"I do," Larkkit pledged, just as her mother as told her to.

"From this day forward you shall be known as Larkpaw. You have faced your six moons with intelligence, determination and constant curiosity. I, Fernstar, will be your mentor and will do my best to train and nurture your spirit."

"SPARROWPAW! LARKPAW!" The Clan began to cheer and chant as in tradition. Fernstar frowned and yowled to silence the crowd.

"I am not finished," she interjected calmly. Quickly, the Clan quieted and waited for her word in confusion. "Another cat will be made an apprentice today, for he is only a half moon off. Thunderkit, come forward."

Fernstar's words hit Thunderkit like a rock. His face was frozen as he sat behind the SkyClan crowd. Eyes slowly turned one by one and locked on the young kit, as he sat. Thunderkit had not groomed himself, and did not feel presentable. The center of the awkward silence, he did not intend to break it. Instead, he lowered his eyes to the ground, submissively.

"Thunderkit, *come forward*," Fernstar repeated sternly.

Raising his eyes, he met Fernstar's expression which seemed calm, as if none of what was occurring was unusual. Thunderkit channeled Fernstar's confidence in the matter and began to walk forward.

The Clan split, making a single path up to the largest stone where Fernstar sat. Thunderkit's eyes strayed from his clan mates as he passed them by. The young tom only made eye contact with Horsepaw, whose face was concerned. When Thunderkit reached the front, he could taste the tension in the air.

Sorrelfoot understood Fernstar's motives and bristled at the thought. Beside her, Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw sat with wide and confused eyes. *This isn't law. This isn't fair*. Larkpaw thought to herself.

As Thunderkit finally reached the front, he glanced toward Grayfrost. The deputy sat beside the high rock where Fernstar sat, and governed the Clan. Grayfrost looked toward Thunderkit with an indifferent expression at first glance. However, as Thunderkit looked closer, he could catch a glimpse of something within Grayfrost's eyes. *Pride*.

"Thunderkit, do you promise to uphold the Warrior code as you endure the challenges ahead of you?" Fernstar asked. Although she had asked the oath three times before him, Thunderkit's words were engrained in his mind.

"I do," he replied quietly.

"From this day forward, you will be known as Thunderpaw," Fernstar declared. "I see the only cat fit to train you in the ways of a Warrior, is Grayfrost. He shall be your mentor, and within time, you shall be a Warrior."

Leaping down from her high rock, Fernstar left the Clan and made her way back uphill, toward the fresh-kill pile. The silence hung in the air and would not be broken.

Sorrelfoot stalked away, followed by Grayfrost who could sense the she cat's fury. Several others followed, confused and discomforted by the situation. Thunderpaw, Horsepaw, Ryepelt, Shinyflower and her kits remained.

"Thunderpaw!" Horsepaw cheered quietly. It only took one cat to prompt the others.

"THUNDERPAW!" Swallowkit and Turtlekit cheered with wide admiring eyes. Ryepelt and Shinyflower grimes, but did not join the cheers. Instead, Ryepelt walked toward Thunderpaw.

"Congratulations," Ryepelt said to Thunderpaw respectfully.

"Thank you," Thunderpaw replied, shocked to even receive a word from a respected Warrior. Soon after, Ryepelt made his way uphill to join Fernstar.

"Congrats Thunderpaw," Shinyflower said with a smile. At this moment, Thunderpaw could not describe how thankful he was for the Queen. Her subtle kindness was not charity, but genuine concern for the young tom.

Shinyflower looked to her three kits, with a dumbfounded look. "Well..."

"Congrats, Thunderpaw! You are going to make an amazing apprentice!" Turtlekit exclaimed.

"And kick squirrel butts-"

"Blackkit," Shinyflower said sharply. Blackkit giggled and ran off with his sister. Swallowkit was the last to come forward.

"I'm going to miss you in the nursery," Swallowkit said sweetly.

"You'll be an apprentice soon," Thunderpaw murmured.

"Yeah. But still-"

"Thunderpaw," Horsepaw interjected, jabbing him with his paw.

"Ow-"

"You're an apprentice! Did you know-"

"No!" Thunderpaw replied. "I had no idea!"

"I'll show you around the apprentice's den before you go have a tour of the forest!" Horsepaw proposed and Thunderpaw nodded.

Eventually the excitement of it all hit him. *No more nursery. Now. I'm not the only one alone*.

Meanwhile, Sorrelfoot stalked off toward the Nursery. Her intentions of speaking to Grayfrost were halted by Larkpaw.

"Mom," Larkpaw called for her to stop. "What just happened?"

"Fernstar's favorite isn't you. It's the bastard rogue, who shouldn't even be alive," Sorrelfoot had no care for the consequence of her words. Larkpaw heard the words clearly. Rather than questioning her mother more, she clenched her fangs together.

"I understand," Larkpaw gritted before stalking off to report her findings to Sparrowpaw.

Sorrelfoot entered the nursery where Grayfrost already sat in what. Within the walls, their discussion would not be as easily heard by clan mates.

"Did you know she would-"

"No!"

"That you would be his mentor?"

"No," Grayfrost lied. "I had no idea."

"She humiliated our kits. It was their apprenticeship day not some bastards!" Sorrelfoot spat with rage.

"Thunderpaw is bigger than any other 6 moon old I have ever seen," Grayfrost retorted.

"I don't care! It's not fair! Every kit has had to wait six moons. Now of all kits a rogue, gets special treatment!"

"Have you ever thought that maybe she wanted to spare Thunderpaw and myself the humiliation of his own day, alone? So they won't be reminded-"

"*Reminded*? Reminded that you are a lousy father and mate. That

you laid with a rogue and brought your mistake for the clan to bear," Sorrelfoot began to laugh. "I am reminded of that every time I see him. Every time I see you."

Grayfrost turned away, holding his tongue. He was tired of apologizing time after time for his mistake.

"Fernstar is a righteous wench," Sorrelfoot mumbled. "From now on make sure your first kits aren't living in the shadow of him. Larkpaw and Sparrowpaw come first. Understood?"

"Whatever you say, *my love*."

"Don't mock me," Sorrelfoot scowled. "Now go apologize to your real children."

# Chapter 21

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 8.5 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Honeynose- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey.

**Apprentices**:

Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 8.5 moons. Mentor is Windwhisker.

Larkpaw- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Fernstar.

Sparrowpaw- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Shrikeclaw.

Thunderpaw- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6 moons. Mentor is Grayfrost.

**Queens**:
Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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The chill of the wind ran through Thunderpaw's pelt, relieving and satisfying him. Despite the time of evening and the cold of leaf-bare, his pelt was hot and wet with the sweat of training. He had never imagined an apprentice's day would be so difficult.

Grayfrost continued down the path of the ravine, leaving him to enjoy leaf-bare's breeze. While he was cooled down, he inhaled the scents of the evening. Thunderpaw had only just begun his training a half-moon ago. The fundamental and first lesson, was the

direction of scents.

"*A scent can determine weather, prey, blood, herbs, fear, attraction, and even tension*." Thunderpaw remembered Grayfrost's words from their first day of training. He listened. He did as he was told. Rarely did Thunderpaw ever ask questions or speak. "*What's got your tongue?"* Grayfrost asked him once. Thunderpaw was at a loss for the words at the time. So he said, "*If have nothing intelligent to say, I don't say it*." And Grayfrost grew to respect him for his silence.

Finally, the sky turned too dark to continue. Thunderpaw left his spot atop the ravine and followed the path down into the ravine. Passing the Warrior's den, he slipped past Windwhisker who sent the tom a curt nod. Thunderpaw returned it and continued down the path.

Despite his origin, the Warriors of SkyClan began to understand and respect Thunderpaw. Thunderpaw attended hunting patrols and border patrols and quickly became acquainted with his Clan members.

Yellowbird and Windwhisker were both warriors without mates. They spent most of their time training apprentices or leading patrols. Yellowbird and Windwhisker shared a strange relationship of subtle flirtatious comments here and there, then other times where they teased each other to no end. Thunderpaw had discovered Windwhisker was litter mates with Sorrelfoot. The discovery made him weary, but it proved unnecessary. Windwhisker had no problem with Thunderpaw.

Shrikeclaw proved to be bitter and unforgiving. With each day of training, his apprentice, Sparrowpaw, became more and more like him. Shrikeclaw was nothing like Grayfrost or Shinyflower who were his litter mates.

Ryepelt was a wise and simple Warrior. If Thunderpaw could choose his mentor, it would have been Ryepelt. Thunderpaw liked Grayfrost but found they did not share many things in common. Grayfrost was vivacious, charming, and talkative. While Thunderpaw was quiet and collected. Grayfrost yearned for a deeper connection with him, while Thunderpaw just wanted to

learn and become a Warrior as swiftly as possible.

They were not completely warm and loving, but Thunderpaw came to be accepted by most of his clan mates.

Thunderpaw passed by the nursery and suddenly felt a cat ran into his side. Being so big, he barely budged. The culprit on the other hand, groaned and got up from the ground.

"Blackkit?"

"Hey! Have you learned any cool battle moves yet?" The young tom asked with bright eyes.

"Not a lot. Not really," Thunderpaw replied.

"Teach me some when you do! Oh! And my sisters say hi," he grumbled at the thought of his sisters. "They're so annoying sometimes."

"I wouldn't know," Thunderpaw chuckled briefly. *What I would give to have someone like me*.

"See you later!" Blackkit said before returning to the nursery.

Thunderpaw bid him farewell and continued down the path until he reached the apprentice's den. As soon as he entered, he heard the loud talking of Sparrowpaw's story of his day which he shared with Larkpaw and a reluctant Sandpaw.

"How was your day?" Horsepaw asked. Although Horsepaw could sleep in the Medicine Cat den, he slept in the apprentice's den when there wasn't an emergency. Horsepaw did not enjoy sleeping in the same den as Swampfur.

"Good. It was tiring," Thunderpaw remarked before plopping down in his nest. Horsepaw nodded.

"I got to remove fleas from Sunnystripe's pelt. And ticks from Shinyflower's kits. I don't know how they got them!" Horsepaw exclaimed. "Seriously. Ticks are awful. You have to use this mouse bile stuff and it's disgusting."

"I bet they hated it," Thunderpaw smirked at the thought. He painted the picture in his mind and it warmed his heart.

"Blackkit thought it was cool in a gross way. Swallowkit was really good about it but wouldn't stop giggling. And Turtlekit..."

"What?"

"Turtlekit kept fidgeting and glancing over to her sister and asking if it would hurt the tick," Horsepaw replied.

"Wow."

"She's something. I don't know whose going to train her."

"Do any of them want to be a medicine cat?" Thunderpaw asked curiously. At this remark, Horsepaw laughed wildly. "What's so funny?"

"Blackkit is too set on being a Warrior. And all Turtlekit and Swallowkit have ever dreamed of are toms."

"Wait, what?"

"You don't see it?" Horsepaw asked.

"See what!"

"Never mind," Horsepaw grinned.

"Tell me-" Thunderpaw insisted before he was cut off by a loud yowl. Thunderpaw and Horsepaw whipped around to face Sparrowpaw sitting prominent and tall in the center of the den.

"All cats gather around for the rogue's ceremony," Sparrowpaw declared with a sly smirk.

"What are you talking about?" Horsepaw snapped.

"Silence! Your leader is speaking," he said in an elaborate and proper voice. Larkpaw laughed quietly at this as her brother went on.

"We have gathered here tonight to join in the apprenticeship of one of our favorite little rogue kits. *Thunderkit*, step forward," Sparrowpaw boomed.

Thunderpaw scowled and turned his cheek away from the tom. Horsepaw wanted to say something but trusted Thunderpaw to hold his own. Sandpaw sat quietly in the corner as this occurred.

"Step forward, Thunderkit!" Sparrowpaw shouted.

"Bite me," Thunderpaw scowled.

"I should banish you for this comment. But alas, the clan would pity it too much. So, do you promise to uphold the Warrior Code blah blah even though your existence has broke it? You do! Then you *now*, shall be known as Thunderpaw. And your mentor..."

"Enough Sparrowpaw," Horsepaw snapped irritably.

"Enough Sparrowpaw," Sparrowpaw mocked in a high pitched voice. "Don't ruin the fun Herb cat! Where were we?"

"His mentor," Larkpaw reminded him with a smirk.

"His mentor shall be McNaire, the slimiest, most disgusting and most murderous rogue of them all," Sparrowpaw declared. Thunderpaw shot to his paws as soon as Sparrowpaw finished his words. Advancing forward, he was now a whisker length from Sparrowpaw.

"*Oh*, did I hurt your feelings?"

"You know why you are piece of fox dung? Because my father loves me. And yours doesn't. Oh wait, isn't it the same tom? Grayfrost, Right? And strange. He's my mentor, instead of yours-"

"Eat dirt you bastard," Sparrowpaw barred his fangs and took the first swipe. His right paw slammed into Thunderpaw's cheek, claws and all.

Thunderpaw hissed and surged forward slashing at Sparrowpaw's face aimlessly. Unfortunately, Sparrowpaw had more battle

experience than Thunderpaw in their half moon of training. Slamming into Thunderpaw, he set him off balance and took him to the ground. Pinning him there, he spit in his eye. Sparrowpaw dug his claws into Thunderpaw's pelt and he grimaced.

"*Cry*," Sparrowpaw taunted. "*Cry for your mommy*!"

Thunderpaw channeled all the strength he had and bucked Sparrowpaw off of him. Sparrowpaw fell and clammered to get to his paws. Thunderpaw took advantage and plunged his claws his the tom's cheek, returning the favor. As more blood was drawn, Sandpaw and Larkpaw's cried for it to stop. Horsepaw had already yelled for an older Warrior.

"What is going on?" Fernstar's voice sent the apprentice's into panic. Immediately, Sparrowpaw and Thunderpaw separated from their fight and split to separate sides of the den.

"It was Thunderpaw!" Larkpaw quickly said.

"Are you kidding me! It was Sparrowpaw!" Horsepaw yelled.

"Fine. Since none of you are being reasonable," Fernstar murmured. "Sparrowpaw, who is at fault?"

"Thunderpaw," he replied.

"Larkpaw, who is at fault?"

"Thunderpaw," she said calmly. Exchanging a heated glare with Larkpaw, Horsepaw wanted to declare her a liar then and there.

"Horsepaw, who is at fault?"

"Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw!"

"Thunderpaw, who is at fault?" Fernstar asked once again, turning her attention to the young tom. He swallowed uncomfortably. Thunderpaw knew neither option would result happily.

"Sparrowpaw," he replied calmly.

"Sandpaw, you seem to not be involved. Can I trust you to tell me the truth?" Fernstar asked redirecting it all to Sandpaw. There were five apprentice's. It all came down to Sandpaw.

"Of course, Fernstar."

"Who is at fault?" Fernstar asked for the fifth and final time. Sandpaw tensed and looked at all the apprentices. However, her glance held on Horsepaw as she made her decision.

"Thunderpaw."

"Horsepaw, make sure Sparrowpaw makes it to the Medicine cat den to clean those cuts. Thunderpaw, come speak with me. The rest of you, go to sleep without future gossip," Fernstar dictated their next steps eloquently before leaving the den, followed by Thunderpaw.

Fernstar led him past the Apprentice's den and down hill, toward the lower part of the ravine. She halted as they reached a small creek within the reaches of camp and the ravine. Sitting down, she glanced around at her surroundings but not directly at Thunderpaw.

For once, Thunderpaw was filled with things he wanted to say. *Why did you keep me? Why didn't you let my mother stay? Where is my mother? Why did you make me an apprentice early? Why is Grayfrost my mentor? What's wrong with Sparrowpaw?*

"You have a lot of questions," Fernstar stated knowingly. "I will answer them on my own terms. In time. But first. I know you don't instigate. What happened back there?"

"Sparrowpaw held a mock ceremony, since I am truly six moons today. He called me a rogue and mentioned my mother. I apologize. I lost control," Thunderpaw replied.

"Apology accepted. I cannot let you go without punishment or things will get worse. However, it is minor. I won't make an announcement. You will perform discreet camp chores and such," Fernstar explained. She took a brief pause before curiosity prompted her. Questions had troubled the young tom for moons.

Troubles no one could truly answer. "Did your mother tell you anything? About where she came from?"

"She called it a bad place. A place where I never have to go. She told me I was safe here. That I would be happy," Thunderpaw replied. Thunderpaw was not confident if the bad place was truly better than SkyClan.

"You will be happy," Fernstar promised. "My father wasn't a good cat. He wasn't a true Warrior. The leader banished him at the time and banned his name from ever being said again. He ruined my mother's good name. We struggled in return. In time, my family rose above it. In time, we became happy."

"Why? Why are you doing this for me?" Thunderpaw struggled to understand.

"You have a quiet demeanor, and you do not ask for anything. Everything you want, you earn," Fernstar stated. "You will earn your place and name amongst this clan. And you deserve the respect from your clan mates. Some respect can only be earned by a respectable mentor, or leader's preference. If you do not earn the respect of your clan mates, you will lose more than their respect. I trust in your future, Thunderpaw. Trust that StarClan will be on your side, and you will amount to great things."

Turning away, it seemed as if their conversation was coming to an end. Fernstar struggled with the discomfort she felt. The loss in Thunderpaw's eyes was chilling and prominent.

"Fernstar!" Thunderpaw felt pressured to ask. *You have to ask. You have to know*. "What happened to her?"

Fernstar's face was hidden from the young tom's view as she contemplated what to say. *The truth? It would ruin him*. She decided.

"She left," Fernstar replied. Thunderpaw winced and felt a frustration boil within him. She was lying. He could smell it. He could tell it. Just as Grayfrost had said.

"When will you tell me the truth?"

"One day," Fernstar promised.

"One day," Thunderpaw echoed. "One day."

# Chapter 22

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 8.5 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Honeynose- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey.

**Apprentices**:
Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 8.5 moons. Mentor is

Windwhisker.

Larkpaw- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Fernstar.

Sparrowpaw- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Shrikeclaw.

Thunderpaw- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6 moons. Mentor is Grayfrost.

**Queens**:
Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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The elder's den smelled of damp and used nests. The air held in the distasteful scent of stinking pelts. Nudging the moss around, Thunderpaw gently arranged it in a circular formation. His task was simple. Fernstar had assigned him to cleaning out and replacing the materials which made their nests. He had only begun two days ago and had finished the Medicine Cat den and Nursery. The task of cleaning the camp was reserved for the Medicine Cat Apprentice or anyone willing, unless a clan member needed a form of punishment.

"I am pleased," Silverclaw remarked as he entered the elder's den.

The silver furred tom crossed over and sat behind Thunderpaw. The apprentice finished by touching in the edges with his paws. "Most apprentices hate punishments. I know your father did."

"My father?" Thunderpaw asked, turning to view Silverclaw. The old tom chuckled as he recalled his memories.

"Yes. He got into too many fights with Sunnystripe. Grayfrost was cleaning out my nest all the time," Silverclaw replied.

"Sunnystripe? Isn't he an elder too?"

"Sunnystripe is litter mates with Ryepelt and Yellowbird. You must have never been told..."

"Told what?"

"Sunnystripe is blind."

"What? How did that-"

"Sunnystripe was deputy before Grayfrost," Silverclaw stated. "He was a great warrior, brave and reckless at times. When his brother, Adderstrike, was killed by the rogues, Sunnystripe led the patrol. Unfortunately, he lost his eyesight on that patrol."

"How? How did he lose it?" Thunderpaw asked with intrigue.

"McNaire's claws raked down my face across my eyes," a voice bellowed from behind them. Sunnystripe suddenly entered the Elder's den and continued the story. "The swelling left, but the damage to my eyes did not."

"Gone? Just like that?"

"Gone," Sunnystrile murmured. "Better get to battle training. Before you end up like me."

Thunderpaw froze at the thought and tried to swallow his fear. The bulge he felt within his belly remained. Sunnystripe noticed his distress and chuckled.

"I'm joking. *Relax*."

"*Right*," Thunderpaw whispered. Leaving the Elder's den, he headed off to find Grayfrost. The unpleasant gut feeling subsided, but the story hung with him. *How awful... One day he was deputy and the next, he was an elder*.

Scanning the camp, Thunderpaw searched for Grayfrost. His mentor was not amongst the prey pile, where Ryepelt and Yellowbird placed their prey for the day. Grayfrost never visited the nursery or Medicine Cat den. And the apprentice's den was empty, as the others were already out and about with their apprentices.

The only others he spotted within camp were Shinyflower's kits. The three sat and relaxed by the stream within the camp. Hoping they would have seen Grayfrost, he headed downhill to meet the kits.

"I heard she took Sparrowpaw out behind Sky's den and beat him for it," Turtlekit murmured as Thunderpaw came up to the three.

"No way," Swallowkit said. "Sorrelfoot would never do that."

"You heard what Sparrowpaw did-"

"Hey," Thunderpaw cut them off. The three littermates whipped their heads around hastily. Swallowkit looked especially surprised to see the young tom.

"Hello!" Turtlekit welcomed before turning to Blackkit. "I told you he wouldn't forget about us.

"I was just wondering if you've seen Grayfrost. I just finished cleaning out the elder's den," Thunderpaw explained briefly. When he finished speaking, Turtlekit frowned and area above her nose wrinkled. Adamantly, the young she kit stalked away. Blackkit rolled his eyes while Swallowkit's eyes were locked on her paws. Thunderpaw soon became self-conscious. "Is something wrong?"

"Thunderpaw, she's just being a kit," Blackkit scowled.

"I don't understand," Thunderpaw admitted with confused eyes.

"She's in love with you!" Blackkit's words made Thunderpaw freeze in place. Dumbfounded he proceeded to question the situation.

"What?" Thunderpaw said in reply. "That's crazy! She's a kit!"

At his words, Swallowkit suddenly stirred. Swallowkit avoided direct eye contract with either of them as she darted away. Blackkit growled and grew angry with Thunderpaw.

"Why are you so stupid!"

"What do you mean?" Thunderpaw mumbled.

"They're she cats not rocks! You should be a little sensitive," Blackkit reprimanded the young apprentice before he barreled away to find and comfort his sisters.

Thunderpaw scoffed. *Why is everything my fault?* He complained silently. He left the stream and headed back uphill, one paw-step at a time. I don't deserve this. *I don't deserve any of this*. He groaned just as he reached the fresh-kill pile.

The young apprentice's eyes scanned over the prey with indifference. His mind was not preoccupied and his felt discontent. Thunderpaw needed a task. Taking a small mouse, he did not check his surroundings. He stepped backward when a sharp tone halted his steps.

"Thunderpaw!" Grayfrost's voice boomed. "What are you doing?"

"I was-"

"Put it down and come with me. *Now*." Grayfrost's eyes were filled with disappoint as they stated down into Thunderpaw's eyes. Thunderpaw dropped the mouse and followed Grayfrost, who stalked away.

Grayfrost led them downhill. And Thunderpaw listened and muttered no word.

"It is against the Warrior code to eat before permitted as an apprentice. Especially in the cold of leaf-bare," Grayfrost retorted.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. What would make you do such a thing? You are already facing punishment for actions against Sparrowpaw. What is wrong with you?"

Thunderpaw remained silent. He was too shocked by Grayfrost's tone. A response would only make it worse.

"Fine. Shut up and stay that way. Your choice," Grayfrost bristled in anger. The tension made Thunderpaw's stomach churn and his pelt hot with embarrassment. *I'll talk one day*. *And everyone will listen*. Thunderpaw swore to himself.

Grayfrost's eyes would not look upon Thunderpaw. He could not bear the thoughts that came with it. *Was Sorrelfoot right? Was Darkgorge right? Will Thunderpaw amount to anything?* The worries made Grayfrost sick. As they reached the edge of the rock-pile, Grayfrost could not control himself any longer.

Grayfrost whipped around and slammed his paw across Thunderpaw's cheek. The apprentice fell to the ground from the force. Thunderpaw stayed down as the throbbing pain of his face continued.

"You will never again do something so inconsiderate and foolish," Grayfrost spat. "You not only risk your lousy reputation but mine. Understand?"

Thunderpaw remained silent, gritting his teeth together.

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

"Yes, Grayfrost."

"*He speaks*!" Grayfrost exclaimed with a thick time of sarcasm. "We are going to battle training with the other apprentices. Please show your best behavior."

"Yes, Grayfrost," Thunderpaw replied. Saying it made him sick, and he was filled with disdain for his mentor and father.

Leaving the ravine, Thunderpaw followed Grayfrost to the gorge, a flat and fertile patch of grasslands. The gorge was the most popular

path toward the forest and streams where most of SkyClan patrols chose to hunt. Rogues had yet to be found on the side of the ravine, home to the gorge.

The mentor and apprentice soon joined the others, and the training session began. Thunderpaw joined the other apprentices, sitting beside Sandpaw who did not seem to care. Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw sat on the other side of her, however, their eyes were locked on Grayfrost.

Grayfrost spoke with Windwhisker, Shrikeclaw and Fernstar for a few moments before proceeding. Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw seemed to yearn for their father's attention when they trained as a group. Thinking about it made Thunderpaw sick. *They have no idea*. He told himself. At this moment, Thunderpaw would give anything to have any other mentor.

As the mentors finished their discussion, they turned to the apprentices. Grayfrost stepped forward and addressed the entire group. It was apparent he would be leading the battle training of the day.

"The move we are learning today is an important one. It is especially valuable to those smaller than their opponent," Grayfrost explained. "It consists of leaping onto your opponent's back and gripping on with unsheathed claws. By doing this, you can especially shake your opponent's concentration as well as the means to deliver the final blow. A bite to the back of the neck."

Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw were bushy tailed and listened with focus. Their eyes followed every step Grayfrost made pacing back and forth. Their ears cherished every word of the lesson. Thunderpaw's focus was for another reason, as his eyes stared a hole into Grayfrost.

While the three apprentices focused for their own motives, Sandpaw's mind was elsewhere. Sandpaw looked away, thinking of anything but training. Although Sandpaw loved battle training, her mind worried for only one thing. *Shrewpaw*.

"For training purposes, you cannot used unsheathed claws or fangs,

as always. However, when on the battlefield you must use them. Understood?"

"Yes Grayfrost," the apprentices said in reply.

"Good. Now understand, a bite to the back of the neck can be very lethal and dangerous. It can render a cat's use of their limbs," Grayfrost said with caution. "Your mentors are all present and watching. However, you must focus on the task at hand, not anything else. Understood?"

At that moment, Thunderpaw saw Grayfrost's eyes meet his. He wanted to roll his eyes. Instead, he quietly replied.

"Yes Grayfrost."

"You will receive a turn with each apprentice and you will show them the same respect you would show a mentor. Before we begin, Fernstar and Windwhisker will demonstrate the move," Grayfrost explained, turning the apprentices' attention to the two warriors.

From across the grassy gorge, they gave each other a nod to begin. Charging forward Windwhisker took the first strike. He missed, for the purpose of the demonstration and Fernstar quickly lunged forward. Her sheathed paws dug into the hunches of Windwhisker. As soon as she took hold, Windwhisker stopped and Fernstar got on the tom's back.

"Who would like to try it first?"

Thunderpaw remained quiet. Grayfrost had taught him many battle moves and Thunderpaw had practiced them with diligence. However, as he glanced over to Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw, his motives changed.

"Larkpaw and..."

"Sandpaw!" Windwhisker called out. "You're particularly quiet. I hope you channel that into your training, please."

Sandpaw closed her eyes and came to her feet. Crossing to the center, she met Larkpaw who was filled with excitement and

energy. Larkpaw could sense Sandpaw's unusual attitude and made sure to focus on her technique more than winning.

"Whenever you're ready," Fernstar permitted. Sandpaw stepped back and so did Larkpaw. As soon as Larkpaw felt prepared, she lunged forward.

The two apprentices engaged in standard battle techniques they had been taught their earliest days. Slashes and nips. Although Sandpaw had more experience as an older apprentice, it did not show.

"Sandpaw! Put some effort into it!" Windwhisker exasperated.

"Larkpaw! Good! Execute the move when you're ready!" Fernstar advised.

As Sandpaw made a strike with her right paw, Larkpaw dodged. Sandpaw felt off her rhythm for a moment. Larkpaw took the moment and took the chance to practice the move. Lunging she extended her back legs and propelled herself into the air. Larkpaw gripped onto Sandpaw's back, but with her claws, found it hard to stay there. Larkpaw slipped off and could not finish the move while Sandpaw whipped around and pinned Larkpaw.

"Enough!" Sandpaw stepped away and was immediately confronted by her mentor. Windwhisker carried an expression of confusion and quickly acted on that.

"Why would you give her that opening?"

"I'm sorry I wasn't thinking," Sandpaw admitted. Windwhisker sense the she cat becoming overwhelmed and he took a breath.

"Don't give her the opportunity next time. Alright?" Windwhisker said.

"Yes, Windwhisker." As Windwhisker finished speaking with Sandpaw, Fernstar spoke with her apprentice.

"Really good lunge and extensions," Fernstar commented. Larkpaw smiled at this. "Next time, make sure you transfer your strength into your paws. You will have your claws in a real battle, but a good

warrior should be able to survive without them."

"Yes, Fernstar. Thank you Fernstar."

"Thunderpaw! Sparrowpaw! You're up," Grayfrost announced as he prepared to observe them critically.

Thunderpaw braced himself, knowing that Sparrowpaw wanted this. Every time they trained together, Sparrowpaw would find a way to beat him or hurt him. And every time, Sparrowpaw would get away with it.

"Prepare to lose, *Roguepaw*," Sparrowpaw muttered under his breath. It was out of ear from the mentors, as usual. Thunderpaw did not reply, only scoffed.

"Go!" Shrikeclaw said, losing patience.

Sparrowpaw wasted no time and quickly advanced on Thunderpaw. Of course, Sparrowpaw's claws were unsheathed and there to taunt Thunderpaw. Glancing over to Shrikeclaw, he noticed Sparrowpaw's mentor was beaming with pride. *Typical.* He scoffed.

"Pay attention!" Grayfrost snapped. The warning sent Thunderpaw back into the fight and he dodged Sparrowpaw's strike just in time.

Slash after slash, it seemed as if Sparrowpaw's advancement was relentless. Thunderpaw grimaced as one of Sparrowpaw's claws snagged on his pelt.

"Sparrowpaw! Sheathe your claws!" Fernstar snapped. Shrikeclaw and Grayfrost watched with more interest, now that Sparrowpaw was fighting with claws.

Thunderpaw felt the sharp cut of Sparrowpaw's claws again. This time, he froze in pain and Sparrowpaw executed the move. Sparrowpaw leaped and but Thunderpaw skirted to the side just in time, avoiding the attack.

"Stop! Both of you!" Fernstar demanded. Sparrowpaw faced a gentle warning from Shrikeclaw and a stern glare from Fernstar. Grayfrost however, charged into the center of the space and took Thunderpaw

by surprise.

"What was that?" Grayfrost spat. "That was a poor excuse for a battle as you stumbled across the gorge!"

As Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw grinned to themselves, Thunderpaw could not stand it any longer.

"Sparrowpaw had unsheathed claws! He cheated! Isn't not fair!" Thunderpaw screamed in reply. Grayfrost would have beaten his son for his tone, if the others weren't watching so closely.

"*It isn't fair*? Life isn't fair, *Thunderpaw*..." Grayfrost retorted under his breath. "It isn't fair to have an unwanted disappointment, reminding you of the mistake you made everyday."

"Is that what I am?"

"It's exactly what you are," Grayfrost muttered. "I don't know why you're holding back. I know what you're capable of. *Tomorrow*, I except you to have a new attitude and work ethic. From now on the only one you blame is yourself. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Grayfrost," Thunderpaw said with poison in his words. *I hate you. I hate you. I hate you*.

"You're dismissed. Go back to camp."

# Chapter 23

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 8.5 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes.

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**Apprentices**:
Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 8.5 moons. Mentor is

Windwhisker.

Larkpaw- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Fernstar.

Sparrowpaw- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Shrikeclaw.

Thunderpaw- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6 moons. Mentor is Grayfrost.

**Queens**:
Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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Thunderpaw wiggled his toes within the grass. The gentle itch was a reminder he was alive. As his paws crunched the blades of grass, he scanned the area with his eyes.

Grayfrost had led him across the gorge, and now paused in thought. Thunderpaw was unaware of what their training would consist of for the day. It had been several days since Battle training, and it seemed Grayfrost was avoiding it. Hunting had been the main priority since the day.

Despite what Grayfrost felt, it was just another morning for Thunderpaw. Animosity and resentment would have to be put aside for the sake of his apprenticeship.

Grayfrost finally made a decision after inhaling the air deeply. Thunderpaw repeated the action, as his mentor began to speak.

"Catch some prey. Meet me by the rock-pile when you've caught something," Grayfrost instructed. Thunderpaw narrowed his eyes in concern.

"What about you..."

"I'll be watching," he replied. "Take this opportunity to practice and display your talent."

"Yes Grayfrost."

Without further word, Grayfrost left his apprentice at the edge of the wood. Thunderpaw's eyes were locked on the nearby tree line. He took a breath and advanced into the forest, headstrong and determined to please Grayfrost.

His paws lead him across the hard forest floor. It was bitter and felt like stone during leaf-bare. Lunging and landing would be harder. The grass and plants of the forest also felt the cold, and retracted into their own space.

*I can't imagine how Horsepaw finds any herbs out here*. Thunderpaw wondered to himself. Every turn and nook, plants were dying and clinging to life and warmth. Thunderpaw would ask his friend next time he visited him to reapply his webs to his wound.

The chirping of birds could be heard nearby and Thunderpaw took action. Crossing to the nearest brush, he crouched amongst the grasses. He remained low, but advanced toward the sound, making sure his paws were light. *Control your breathing. Keep your body calm. Keep your tail low*. All of his mentor's advice rushed through his mind.

"*What are you doing?*" Thunderpaw had asked Grayfrost on the first day they went hunting. His mentor had replied, "*I am mimicking the*

*sounds of the birds.*"

Thunderpaw's ears perked and his eyes shifted upward. Taking charge, he decided to go with the idea. He produced the low sounds and his throat tickled at the vibrations. The birds replied, but they were not drawn closer.

His fangs parted and he tasted the scents on the air. Thunderpaw followed the scents of the birds across the forest, for many tree lengths. The birds called to each other in an unceasing chorus.

As he neared the source of the birds and the canopy came in view, another sound ringed in his ears. The subtle flow and drip of water. The gentle flow of the stream was mingled amongst the chirping. The trees parted and Thunderpaw's eyes fell upon the stream. The widest stream he had set eyes on. It churned with power, despite the freezing qualities of the cold. The color of the stream was eery and stirred a disturbance with all who glanced upon its dark hue and depth.

Beside the stream, resided a she cat of a gray pelt and thin stature.

"Larkpaw?" Thunderpaw murmured at the sight of the she cat. Her head whipped around and her pale green eyes met his. The eyes of Sorrelfoot.

"Thunderpaw," she said in surprise. "You scared me."

"Sorry," Thunderpaw quickly apologized.

"What are you doing here?" Larkpaw asked with a curious gleam in her eyes. Thunderpaw stepped forward.

"Hunting," Thunderpaw replied.

"*Alone*?"

"Yes. Grayfrost sent me out alone for the first time," Thunderpaw's words slowed. His words and breathing stopped completely, as Sparrowpaw walked out of the brush. Larkpaw grinned, as Sparrowpaw joined them on the shore. And the two siblings shared a sly smirk.

"Where are your mentors?"

"Far away," Sparrowpaw murmured.

Before Thunderpaw sensed it coming, they charged toward him. Larkpaw grabbed one flank while Sparrowpaw tackled the other. Larkpaw rammed into his side and he lost balance. Sparrowpaw sank his fangs into Thunderpaw's scruff and pulled him down.

Thunderpaw's strength and resistance was enough to keep their claws away. Unfortunately, the two were strong enough to push him toward the waters. As soon as his eyes glanced upon the dark waters before him, his screams rang in the air.

"Take it you piece of fox dung!" Sparrowpaw spat. Thunderpaw resisted with a wild struggle. Fear ran through his veins and his screams and shouts continued.

"Are you a fish, you little piece of fox dung?" Larkpaw cackled with venom in her words. "Wanna go for a swim?"

Thunderpaw fell into the water. The icy water cut into his fur, and it burned although it was the furthest from fire. His paws met the bottom of the stream and he kicked it, trying to surface. Sparrowpaw and Larkpaw's paws pushed him down.

Their paws pushed down with more force and it seemed death was inevitable. His struggle was relentless as his paws scrambled for relief. The water began to feel like a hundred sharp claws and fangs, cutting into his flesh, everywhere.

Thunderpaw could contain his pain no longer. His remaining breath left him as his screams echoed under the water's surface. As his air left him, his lungs struggled for breath. The need to surface became immediate. All that came, was the apparent realization. Larkpaw and Sparrowpaw would not have their satisfaction, until Thunderpaw was dead.

The fear persisted, until the paws left. A ringing silence continued in his ears and Thunderpaw could no longer feel his toes. He longed to surface, though he could muster no strength.

And when all seemed lost, life was breathed into Thunderpaw. Taken by the scruff and pulled out of the water, Thunderpaw surfaced.

Thunderpaw gasped for air, as he crawled onto the shore. He continued to struggle for air as he coughed.

"You should be more careful near water, Thunderpaw! You're not a fish. You aren't much of a swimmer," Horsrpaw chuckled at the sight of him, oblivious to what had occurred.

"I... *Hate them*," Thunderpaw struggled to say through chattered fangs and weak lungs.

"*Thunderpaw*? What happened?"

"They tried to kill me," Thunderpaw murmured. "They almost drowned me."

"Oh StarClan..."

"If you weren't here, I would have died," Thunderpaw muttered before he grew weak. He could not contain his emotions any longer. "I can't do this alone. They have to pay. *Promise me*."

Through Thunderpaw's sobbing eyes, Horsepaw could see a change. He could sense it. Moved to comfort or help his friend in any way, he complied.

"*I promise*." Horsepaw saw something more than just sorrow. Thunderpaw's fear had vanished, while Horsepaw's fear had just begun.

# Chapter 24

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 9 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Honeynose- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey.

**Apprentices**:

Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 9 moons. Mentor is Windwhisker.

Larkpaw- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 7 moons. Mentor is Fernstar.

Sparrowpaw- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 7 moons. Mentor is Shrikeclaw.

Thunderpaw- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Grayfrost.

**Queens**:
Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 5.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 5.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 5.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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**Rogues**:

Grimsby- a white furred tom, scrawny and old with yellow eyes.

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Sage- a dark golden tabby she cat with pale green eyes. **Kits**: Adderkit (tom), Opalkit (she cat), Goldkit (tom), and Whitekit (tom).

Adderkit- a golden tabby tom with a black tipped tail, and toes. He has amber eyes. 3 moons old.

Opalkit- a golden tabby she cat with amber eyes. 3 moons old.

Goldkit- a golden furred tom with brown eyes. 3 moons old.

Whitekit- a white furred tom with light green eyes. 3 moons old.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 9.5 moons old.

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Light seeped into the foyer. Reaching the tips of the room, it blinded and caused a stir amongst the sleeping cats. Ned rustled in his bed, and blinked uneasily. He became accustomed to the blinding rays of light, and stood. He stretched by bending down so that there was a dip in his spine. When he felt relieved of his back's stiffness, he looked around.

Sage slept soundly, surrounded by the four kits that clung to her. Each was about three moons old, and full of boundless energy. Ned treasured the moments where the kits slept quietly and did not stir. Ned traipsed across the house, careful not to wake the litter. The elder slept down the hall, away from the others. When he came upon their elder's sleeping body, he spoke up.

"Grimsby," Ned whispered. When the elder tom did not react, Ned nudged his white fur. "It's morning."

"Don't you remember the first rule," he croaked irritably.

"Never wake Grimsby... I know," Ned recited.

"Exactly-"

"But it's the day," the young blue tom cut Grimsby off. Suddenly, the drowsy Grimsby remembered.

"Indeed," he coughed. Grimsby rose to his paws and rubbed his muzzle against his paws. His whiskers twitched and he looked at Ned. "The Twolegs will return at noon. Make sure Sage and the

litter are awake and gone by then."

"I still don't understand..."

"How many times do I have to tell you," Grimsby sighed. "You are going to help her make it to SkyClan territory. You can stay or you can return, I don't care!"

"No... I know. I meant, why does Sage and her kits have to go?" Ned asked. The young tom loved his new life, and all the members of it. Losing Sage and the kits, would be losing part of it.

"You're not the first to seek refuge with a twoleg. Cats everywhere come. But when there's too many, or when there's a litter of kits... They take them away."

"Away?"

"To other twolegs and to new lands. Far away."

"But we were born here. Surely a twoleg wouldn't take us away," Ned wondered.

"Not you or me. They will keep us. Maybe Sage. But those four kits will be taken away. And they'll never return," Grimsby explained. "She loves those kits. And she will raise them. *In SkyClan*."

"Grimsby," Ned spoke up. "You know, I don't want to leave. I'll come back!"

Grimsby chuckled and narrowed his eyes. Grinning, he replied. "The Clans spur adventure. Don't you want to be apart of it?"

"I don't want to leave you!" Ned stated adamantly. "You have done everything for me. For Sage. I won't leave."

"You're cute kiddo," Grimsby smiled. "Just do this one favor for me. Make sure Sage and let kits get there safely. They will need your help. Alright?"

"I will," Ned promised. He yearned to show Grimsby a token of his appreciation. Instead he just smiled at the tom, and walked back to

Sage. *You will return*. He told himself.

Ned returned to their comfortable nests to find the kits were wide awake. They cackled and laughed, as two of them engaged in a wrestling match with heightened stakes.

"I will destroy you!" Whitekit screamed, hurtling himself into his brother's flank. Goldkit grunted as he did, and tried to maintain his balance. However intense the battle was, it stopped as they noticed Ned.

"Ned!" Opalkit yelled gleefully.

"Yay! You've come to play with us!" Goldkit smiled. Adderkit shared an expression of hopefulness with Whitekit.

"Soon," Ned smiled, lunging at the kits. They screamed in excitement. Opalkit giggled and tripped as she ran into Whitekit. Adderkit and Goldkit hid behind a chair.

"Do any of you know where Sage is?"

"Mommy is on the window sill in the smelly water bowl room," Adderkit replied.

"We'll play soon," Ned told him, before he crossed to the bathroom. Slipping past the small opening, he entered the room just above the water bowl, perched on the window sill, was Sage. The sun brought out the radiant gold within her pelt, and the sparkle in her green eyes. When she heard Ned enter, she turned to face him.

"It's the day," Ned said.

"I know," Sage replied calmly. "I've been counting down the days. Watching the sun rise and the moons set."

Ned didn't speak, he just watched Sage. The she cat sighed and turned toward Ned.

"What if he's still out there? *Waiting."*

"What will he do?"

"They're McCallistar's kits. He would kill them."

"He would kill me first," Ned assured her. "I'll make sure he never lays a paw on them."

"You can't promise that. McNaire is too strong."

"It's been three moons, since you last saw him. Maybe he's forgotten," Ned suggested.

"No," Sage said almost immediately. "He'll never be satisfied until he gets his way. Every aspect of it."

"We'll make it to SkyClan. And McNaire will never touch you, or them, ever again," Ned said adamantly.

"I hope you're right," she whispered. Looking out over the twolegplace. Paranoia infected Sage's mind as the day progressed.

Sage, Ned, and the kits escaped the twoleg's den as planned. When the twoleg returned to the house, it opened the door and left it open, carrying things inside. Using this time, Ned slipped out the door and out past the mechanical monster that reeked of thunder path. For the first time since he found sanctuary with Grimsby, he went outside.

The smells and the light was overwhelming. The cool air chilled his fur, but heightened the adrenaline of the situation. Staying on task, he aided as each kit ran through the and to him. Finally Sage joined him just as the large panel closed off the mechanical monster and the house.

The outside was surreal, exciting and overwhelming for each kit. It was difficult keeping their journey moving, because each kit was preoccupied with the world around them. The cats made it to the woods, beyond the twolegplace, and would continue even as the sun sank in the sky.

"Should we stop when it's dark?" Ned asked when dusk was upon them.

"No," Sage said. Her fear of McNaire was too consuming. "We

cannot stop."

As night came upon the traveling cats, it also came upon SkyClan. Each cat settled in their nests and finished any necessary tasks of the days. After a day of exhausting and rigorous training, none of the apprentices noticed Thunderpaw's empty nest, cold and identical to how he left it nights ago.

Swampfur meditated at Sky's rock frequently. The troubled Medicine cat tried to make sense of muddled dreams and omens manifested in is everyday life. He grew so desperate he made a makeshift nest at the foot of the boulder, and rested their many nights.

However, on this night, Swampfur could no longer bear the soreness in his back and the cold wind of leaf-bare bombarding his pelt. Swampfur decided to surrender his meditation for a night of night of comfort. Through the chill of the night, he made his way toward his den.

Once within, he was comforted by a stillness in the air. The wind no longer attacked him at every end. He was about to lay down in his nest when a strange noise stopped him. Swampfur's desperation for sleep could not be satisfied by the grunts and grumbles coming from the herb stores.

Swampfur stood and crossed over to the herb stores where he discovered the an unshakable sight.

In the middle of the herb stores, Thunderpaw stood. The apprentice had cleared the herbs and used the open space. Slashing back and forth, he battered the stone wall with his paws. Occasionally, he enacted a new maneuver. Thunderpaw practiced over and over again, making improvements in his technique and execution.

Thunderpaw's back was to the Medicine cat, and the apprentice could not see him. Swampfur watched in quiet observance for many moments. The apprentice muttered quiet words and occasionally spat at the ground. He was physically and emotionally engaged.

"I'm not a bastard!" He snarled, batting the rock. "I'm not dung!" He

made another slash. "And before you're made a Warrior, I will kill you!" Thunderpaw promised to himself. As he did, he maneuvered a difficult move and landed on the stone floor, panting. The apprentice's rage reminded him of a deadly rogue, McNaire. The sickening similarities bothered Swampfur. He could no longer stay silent as a rage bellowed within him.

"What do you think you're doing?" Swampfur yelled. Thunderpaw whipped around, astonished and shocked to see the Medicine cat. "I'll ask again. What do you think you're doing?"

"I was finishing my punishment chores. I came to clean up-"

"Your punishment is over," Swampfur retorted. "What were you doing?"

"Practicing," he said quietly.

"Practicing?" *For what?* Swampfur wanted to say, but held himself back. "Practicing is during the day, with you mentor present."

"Yes, Swampfur."

"Apprentices must be in the apprentice's den at nightfall unless otherwise stated by a Warrior. Who gave you permission!"

"No one, Swampfur," Thunderpaw whispered in reply. The Medicine cat growled and grew closer to Thunderpaw.

"If I ever catch you a tail-length near these herb stores, you will wish you were never born-"

"I already do," Thunderpaw muttered under his breath.

"What did you say?" Swampfur yelled.

"Nothing, Swampfur," Thunderpaw replied.

"Get out!"

# Chapter 25

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 9 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Honeynose- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey.

**Apprentices**:
Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 9 moons. Mentor is

Windwhisker.

Larkpaw- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 7 moons. Mentor is Fernstar.

Sparrowpaw- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 7 moons. Mentor is Shrikeclaw.

Thunderpaw- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Grayfrost.

**Queens**:
Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green. **Kits**: Turtlekit (she cat), Swallowkit (she cat), and Blackkit (tom)

**Kits**:
Turtlekit- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 5.5 moons.

Swallowkit- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 5.5 moons.

Blackkit- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 5.5 moons.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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**Rogues**:

Grimsby- a white furred tom, scrawny and old with yellow eyes.

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Sage- a dark golden tabby she cat with pale green eyes. **Kits**: Adderkit (tom), Opalkit (she cat), Goldkit (tom), and Whitekit (tom).

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Goldkit- a golden furred tom with brown eyes. 3 moons old.

Whitekit- a white furred tom with light green eyes. 3 moons old.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 9.5 moons old.

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Sitting complacently beside Sparrowpaw, Larkpaw enjoyed her bird. It was a Finch, from the look of its feather and size, the first Larkpaw had tasted. Sparrowpaw was not as complacent.

"He's slow! In group practices, I beat him every time! It's kind of pathetic," Sparrowpaw remarked. Larkpaw figured that Sparrowpaw's love of gossip, was inherited from queens.

"Who cares. That's good, isn't it? Less competition," Larkpaw replied frankly.

"Don't you see?" He exasperated.

"See what?"

"Thunderpaw is so weak now. He's so bad at fighting! But he could get better! What then?"

"What do you mean?" Larkpaw frowned, taking a bite.

"How are we going to kill him when he's good?" Sparrowpaw asked with a earnest expression.

"Are you crazy? Kill him? We were just messing around by the stream! Besides. Killing a cat is against the Warrior code," Larkpaw stated firmly.

"Shrikeclaw says it doesn't always apply. When we get the chance, we have to kill McNaire!"

"Yeah, but that's *McNaire*. Thunderpaw is not McNaire!"

"They're rogues. Rogues are all the same," her brother spat.

"Some rogues have talent. McNaire is strong, intelligent, invincible and evil. Thunderpaw is pathetic. Just like you said," Larkpaw replied. "Nothing more."

"Whatever. I'm going to practice with Shrikeclaw..."

"Now?"

"Yeah! Battle training," Sparrowpaw said. "Is Fernstar not taking you out?"

"Not for a while. Then hunting..."

"Fernstar is no fun. That's a real bummer Larkpaw. I mean... If Grayfrost passes down his battle techniques to Thunderpaw. He'll be invincible!"

Sparrowpaw darted away, leaving Larkpaw to ponder her thoughts. Her pelt was ruffled in more ways than one. Determination seeped into her veins and she had to see something done about it.

Ditching the rest of the finch, Larkpaw spotted Grayfrost returning from camp. Her father appeared to be climbing up the path, probably heading toward Fernstar's den. As soon as able, Larkpaw conjured a conversation. After idle chatter, Larkpaw popped the real question.

"Are you sure we can't work on that last maneuver?"

"It's far too difficult for you, apprentices," Grayfrost explained. "I was wrong to bring it up so soon."

"The last maneuver was difficult, but I am willing to work at it. If we could just have more group sessions-" Larkpaw struggled to explain.

"Group sessions are not productive for all apprentices," he replied.

"But Grayfrost..." Grayfrost climbed up the rocky path, toward Fernstar's den. He was trailed by his daughter, Larkpaw. As she rambled on, Grayfrost's thoughts were elsewhere.

"I can't help you, Larkpaw. I have business to attend to," Grayfrost finished the conversation. Larkpaw was left to her own devices.

*So much for trying to work hard*. Larkpaw thought to herself. Frustration swelled through her at the thought of going back to training. Fernstar's training approach consisted of patience and gentle instruction. Larkpaw yearned for a more challenging rhetoric. Her brother, Sparrowpaw, learned new maneuvers every day. Battle training was important in Shrikeclaw's mentorship. However, Sparrowpaw had none of the foundation. He would learn the maneuvers, but could not enact them consistently. The early technique was not in his muscles yet.

Larkpaw knew this. She knew her Sparrowpaw's mentor was unorthodox and questionable. But she believed, there was a happy medium. When Grayfrost led group battle sessions, he was brilliant. Often, Larkpaw was struck with awe. Grayfrost knew the art of the battle very well. Thunderpaw had the happy medium. Grayfrost's training placed an equal distribution on hunting and battle, but still rigorous.

At Grayfrost's denial, Larkpaw felt lousy. Envy crawled in and she went back to her finch. She slammed her paw against the tiny bones that remained. *If only I had Grayfrost instead of*...

"Fernstar?"

"Come in!" Fernstar replied quickly. The tabby she cat was sitting up, finishing a shrew. When she swallowed her last bite, she spoke up. "I think it's time that Shinyflower's kits were apprenticed."

"Isn't there half a moon left?" Grayfrost recalled how the Clan was whipped into a frenzy, when Thunderpaw was made an apprentice too early.

"I believe it will not hinder them. Rather, improve their talents and

prepare them for the future," Fernstar explained.

"Do we even have enough Warriors to mentor them?"

"Yes, I have thought about it," she continued. "Blackkit will be mentored by Ryepelt. His wound isn't concerning him anymore and he is ready to mentor again. Turtlekit will be mentored by Firfoot. And I wasn't sure about Swallowkit..."

"What about Sorrelfoot?" Grayfrost suggested. "It would be good for her, to get back into the routine."

"Good thinking," Fernstar said in realization. "Thank you, that was all."

As Grayfrost turned to leave, he felt a tinge of guilt. He hesitated while he remembered Larkpaw's request. *One word.*

"Is there something else?" Fernstar asked. Enthralled in thought, Grayfrost remained silent. *She's your daughter... No. She's her mother's daughter.*

Grayfrost gave a quick glance to his paws. "Nothing."

It was a little after noon when Thunderpaw watched Shrikeclaw and Sparrowpaw leave camp. Grayfrost and Thunderpaw were also scheduled for a training session, however, Grayfrost was discussing important matters with Fernstar. Thunderpaw's friend and confidant, Horsepaw, had been out training with Swampfur since dawn.

With no one to chat with, Thunderpaw found his gaze drifting upward. For the first time in awhile, the young apprentice was able to admire the beauty of the ravine. The walls were stony, rough and cavernous. However dangerous some ledges may be, the ravine was how to a clan, more prosperous each day.

In the midst of admiring the small icicles that lined the ridges, Thunderpaw's eye caught sight of something.

Thunderpaw frowned. A feline figure walked carefully down the path, carrying something in its jaws. The cat was followed by a

similar figure, then a tiny kitten, struggling to follow their wide strides.

"Hello?" The figures kept climbing down the path.

"Stop! This is SkyClan territory!" Thunderpaw called out. He stood still, not prepared to fight off the intruders. Thunderpaw's warning alerted his clanmates within camp.

Grayfrost heard Thunderpaw's voice and shot to his paws. Racing over, he rushed past Thunderpaw. Grayfrost halted near the nursery, in shock. Immediately, the deputy recognized a face. Her eyes were frightened, her legs had grown, and her pelt radiated a golden hue.

"It can't be..."

"Grayfrost," she called out. Her words were cautious and the kittens around her were trembling. "Do you remember me?"

Grayfrost climbed up the path until he was only paces away. "Sagepaw..." Then, he stepped forward and touched noses with the she cat. A relief overcame the refugees, and Ned sighed while tears trailed down Sage's cheek.

"I never thought I would return," she whimpered, overcome by emotion.

Out of nowhere, Grayfrost whipped his head around and barked out an order to Thunderpaw. "Fetch Firfoot! Tell Fernstar! Tell the whole clan while you're at it! The lost apprentice has returned!"

The commotion lit the clan like a wildfire. The Warriors and the elders shot out of their dens as soon as they heard Thunderpaw's call. Sunnystripe, although blind, stumbled out trying to follow Silverclaw along the stony path. Firfoot was not on patrol, an unusual occurrence, and was the second clan-mate to greet Sagepaw.

Mother and daughter cried tears of joy, and clung to each other. Both Firfoot and Sage were afraid to let go of each other. Clan-mates crowded around Sage and her party.

"Firfoot, this is my friend Ned, and... these are my kits," Sage whispered awkwardly. However, Firfoot did not see it as awkward. The mother of Sage saw a reflection of her kin within the kittens, which brought more joy than expected.

"Kin of my kin," Firfoot whispered lovingly. Bombarded with greetings, licks, and purrs, the party became overwhelmed, and many stared at Ned with suspicion. Sage was concerned with finding another face among the crowd. She scanned carefully but could not find it.

"Where's Adderstrike? Where's father?" Her words abruptly cut off the chatter of the clan-mates. Stunned and stricken, Firfoot stood paralyzed. *She doesn't know*... "Where is he? Is he on patrol?"

"Sagepaw," Grayfrost murmured, seeing that Firfoot was not fit to deliver the news.

"What is it?" Sage's voice quivered as she sensed Grayfrost's tone.

"Adderstrike is dead. He was killed on the day you were taken."

"*What*?" She muttered. "I don't understand-"

"Your father ran after you," Grayfrost explained. "He tried to save you. McNaire killed him."

Sage felt herself collapse. Full of utter grief. In that moment, it seemed she would never free herself of McNaire. Despite being ravine-lengths away, he would take from her until there is nothing left to take.

Larkpaw watched the commotion with another taste in her mouth. All she could see was the joy, excitement and love exchanged. Grayfrost's eagerness and love of Sage, would poison her mind. The image would fester in Larkpaw's mind and blossom, over time. Envy sprouted.

# Chapter 26

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 9 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes.

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Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Honeynose- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey.

**Apprentices**:
Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 9 moons. Mentor is

Windwhisker.

Larkpaw- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 7 moons. Mentor is Fernstar.

Sparrowpaw- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 7 moons. Mentor is Shrikeclaw.

Thunderpaw- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 6.5 moons. Mentor is Grayfrost.

Turtlepaw- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 5.5 moons. Mentor is Firfoot.

Swallowpaw- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 5.5 moons. Mentor is Sorrelfoot.

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**Queens**:
Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green.

Sage- a dark golden tabby she cat with pale green eyes. **Kits**: Adderkit (tom), Opalkit (she cat), Goldkit (tom), and Whitekit (tom).

**Kits**:
Adderkit- a golden tabby tom with a black tipped tail, and toes. He has amber eyes. 3 moons old.

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Grimsby- a white furred tom, scrawny and old with yellow eyes.

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 9.5 moons old.

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A slow morning crept upon SkyClan.

The sun remained shrouded by a thick layer of gray clouds. Frost laid upon the grass and hung in the air. The cold was isolating and kept the creatures of the forests deep within their dens.

All warriors were slow to leave their nests, except for the medicine cat apprentice. Horsepaw wiggles his toes, trying to shake the chill of the cold.

In the nest beside him, Thunderpaw was curled up tightly. His friend was often exhausted. The two friends had not spoken in awhile, due to the stressful training they had to endure. Thunderpaw's dark gray tabby pelt was growing thicker and longer than usual, with the arrival of leaf-bare. *Finally! You're getting some sleep*. Horsepaw wanted to tell Thunderpaw.

Horsepaw glanced over to the new nests, and the new apprentices asleep upon them. Shinyflower's kits took on their apprenticeship a half a moon early, and the first day exhausted them. With Sage's return only two days prior, all warriors struggled with time management. Patrols were increased. Training was increased. And Sage was almost always in the company of a fellow clanmate and Ned. Sage's mother, Firfoot, seldom left her daughter.

Horsepaw worried it would be a problem. Firfoot had promised him, she would accompany him to the infected stream. The young medicine cat apprentice had successfully warned SkyClan and found

a cure to its waters. However, the leaders did little to propose a solution. Swampfur refused to listen to Horsepaw in the matter, despite the fact his training was going well. No cat was allowed to venture out alone, especially an apprentice.

So, the young tom waited. Horsepaw withstood the crisp air sat in the center of the camp, keeping watch over all movement. Leaf-bare drained the camp's energy. Leaf-bare despaired and stiffened spirits. While green-leaf was full, leaf-bare was empty.

It was past dawn when he saw Firfoot slip into the apprentice's den. As quick as she entered, she left the den and headed uphill. Horsepaw wanted to intercept the warrior when someone caught his eye.

Turtlepaw emerged from the apprentice's den. She caught sight of Horsepaw and made strides toward him. Leaf-bare had drained Turtlepaw's energy. The she cat had become significantly quieter since the ceremony. Stress weighed down her eyes and her tail drooped. The sight of her made Horsepaw tired.

"I spoke with Firfoot," Turtlepaw said. "She said she has a meeting with Fernstar. She can't come on your patrol, so she sent me."

"Sent you?" Horsepaw frowned.

"What? Is that bad?"

"Firfoot wasn't thinking. Two young apprentice's can't go out alone. Besides, you were just made an apprentice two days ago!" Horsepaw exasperated. The young apprentice had waited patiently for moons, now, even Firfoot, bailed on him.

"I'm sorry... I can go get Sandpaw-"

"No! I didn't mean to sound rude! I meant. Sending two apprentices is silly, in general," Horsepaw explained. Turtlepaw's face softened and she gave a small smile.

"Yeah. You're right," she replied. "What're you going to do?"

"I am not breaking clan law, but there is a lot I need to do today

while Swampfur sleeps in. Would you like to come along?"

"Sure!"

"It's camp work. Sometimes, I just go around the ravine and check for plants, nests and burrows. Anyone can do it if they're careful," Horsepaw explained.

"What do you mean by careful?" Turtlepaw asked.

"Dangers are lurking all around us," Horsepaw whispered in a devilish voice. He chuckled, then resumed in his normal tone. "Gotta watch out for snakes, bees, wasps, ants, and unknown plants..."

"Wait, I thought plants were good. Don't they heal us?" Turtlepaw narrowed her eyes and Horsepaw grinned.

"Plants are strange. They can give the entire clan an itch! Or, save a kit's life," Horsepaw declared.

"Wow... I never though plants were so-"

"Remarkable? Plants are different. Prey is predictable. I think that's why I love being a medicine cat."

"Really? I mean... With all the medicine cat rules... And, having Swampfur as a mentor? You still love it?" Turtlepaw asked, attentive and highly curious.

"I despise Swampfur. He used to be a very dedicated mentor, then... things happened. He hasn't been well lately. But I wouldn't change anything," Horsepaw laughed while Turtlepaw frowned. "I wouldn't be the medicine cat I am today, if I hadn't experienced independence. Swampfur still teaches me. But it's from my own discoveries and experiences that makes me love it."

"I hope I love being a Warrior as much as you love being a Medicine cat," Turtlepaw remarked.

"We all have something. Leadership. Plants. Hunting. Fighting. Sun-bathing. Running. Mothering... Every cat has something."

"You're so smart. You're going to be a great Medicine cat!" Turtlepaw smiled.

"Thank you. You're so nice," Horsepaw replied, flattered by her words.

The apprentices gazed around camp and were surprised by the lack of activity. Clanmates, young and old, did not want to leave the warm comfort of their nests. The cold chill of the frosty air was persuasion enough to stay inside.

Horsepaw's thick long strands of fur formed his tabby pelt. The reddish hue was streaked in between the standard brown color he shared with his kin. His eyes watched the leader's den, anxiously, wondering if Firfoot would finish their business early.

Turtlepaw's focus was not as keen. Her short fur was neat and groomed, but not insulating in the thick of leaf-bare. Her pale green eyes glanced over Horsepaw. Only the comfort of conversation distracted Turtlepaw from the cold.

"Why can't anyone go out alone?" She asked as the thought occurred.

"McNaire, I think."

"McNaire?"

"You don't know?" Horsepaw frowned.

"No, I just don't know why Warriors are so afraid of him. No one talks about him. Shinyflower is afraid to say his name," Turtlepaw explained. Her curious eyes gleamed, not quite understanding the darkness behind the name.

"Rogues have always existed. McNaire is different. He's a killer. A warrior killer."

"Oh," Turtlepaw replied. "Um... You're friends with Thunderpaw right?"

"Yes. He's my best friend," Horsepaw said. The words were

comforting to him.

"Is his father McNaire?"

"What? Why would you say that?"

"I'm just asking!" Turtlepaw insisted.

"Of course not!" Horsepaw retorted with a salty tone. Horsepaw sensed a thorn was thrown in between Turtlepaw's and his relationship. *Why would she ask that?*

"I'm sorry... I just... Sparrowpaw told us that McNaire was his father... It really upset Swallowpaw-"

"*Sparrowpaw*," Horsepaw scowled at the name. Suddenly, it all made sense.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to be rude-"

"You are fine," Horsepaw sighed. "Really, it's not your fault. Thunderpaw and I are just really sick of Sparrowpaw's fox-dung."

"I'm sorry..."

"Thunderpaw is Grayfrost's son!" Horsepaw stated adamantly. "Sparrowpaw is a fox-hearted mouse brain, treating Thunderpaw like he's less of a warrior... *StarClan*... it makes me sick."

"He's pretty bad... isn't he?"

"The worst."

"I wish I could do something," she remarked. Horsepaw's eyes flickered upward as the spark came to him. The medicine cat apprentice took off down the ravine.

"Horsepaw!" Turtlepaw called after him, baffled. "Horsepaw! Wait up!" The she cat raced after Horsepaw, but didn't arrive in time to see the instigator.

In front of the apprentice's den, Sparrowpaw and Horsepaw stood.

Whisker to whisker, Turtlepaw could only make out the last words.

"Cut it out, you piece of-"

"Threatening me huh, Herb?" Sparrowpaw scoffed. The gray tom was initially annoyed at the disturbance. But gradually, a smirk replaced any displeasure he had.

"Thunderpaw is son of Grayfrost. More than you will ever be! Stop spreading your lies you jealous mousebrain," Horsepaw growled. Sparrowpaw noticed Turtlepaw standing a few paces away.

"Did you snitch on me Turtlepaw?" Sparrowpaw retorted. Turtlepaw looked away, flustered and nervous.

"Don't talk to her! You don't have the right-"

"Listen, *Herb,"* Sparrowpaw menaced. "You can make threats all day long! Go ahead. But we know, you can't keep me from talking to anyone. Turtlepaw has a mind of her own, don't you-"

"Stop," she muttered.

"See, she can even speak for herself. She'll be a warrior, more than you, *Herb*, will ever be."

"Stop!" Turtlepaw snapped. Sparrowpaw averted his eyes from Horsepaw and looked at the she cat.

"Watch it. Or you'll regret it-"

"Who is making threats now?" Turtlepaw interjected.

Before Sparrowpaw made an audible response, he chose another route. The apprentice barreled toward Turtlepaw, with unsheathed claws. The newly made apprentice had no idea how to react, except scream. Turtlepaw ran away and Sparrowpaw halted. The tom began to laugh hysterically at the skittish, Turtlepaw.

"I can keep the threats I make-"

Sparrowpaw was cut off back claws ripping through pelt. He

howled as tiny drops of blood fell from the wound. Whipping his head around, Sparrowpaw came face to face with Horsepaw. The medicine cat apprentice had kept his threat.

Surging forward, Horsepaw clawed and fought in any means. With little combat training, Horsepaw had the disadvantage. Sparrowpaw quickly realized Horsepaw was serious and evaded his strikes, each time. When the medicine cat apprentice grew weak, Sparrowpaw advanced.

Sparrowpaw slammed his front paw across Horsepaw's face, and nearly knocked the tom off his feet. Sparrowpaw's retaliation was fierce and gave no mercy. Horsepaw took blow after blow until he had no will to get back up.

Turtlepaw remained frozen in fear. Sparrowpaw's frame, claws and fang were intimidating and paralyzing. She had no idea what action to take. It was not until Horsepaw stumbled and failed to get back up, that she surged forward.

Inches from piercing Sparrowpaw's pelt, Turtlepaw was blocked and pushed to the ground. Sparrowpaw had expected her outburst and simply tossed her off to the side. Turning back to Horsepaw, it seemed Sparrowpaw would finish his threat.

"Why are you so mean?" Turtlepaw muttered. Sparrowpaw hovered over Horsepaw, his back to the den.

Sparrowpaw didn't answer. Thunderpaw made sure of it.

The blow sent Sparrowpaw tumbling forward. The aggressive apprentice was dazed and confused, but whipped around to see Thunderpaw take a power stance.

His thick fur ruffled in the subtle breeze. Thunderpaw was taller and stronger. Yet, the tom was calmer than he had been in the last moon. Turtlepaw and Horsepaw stared at Thunderpaw in complete awe.

"Go clean yourself up, Sparrowpaw," Thunderpaw spat.

"We're not done-"

"The fight was over when you attacked a day old apprentice and a medicine cat," he corrected Sparrowpaw. Thunderpaw's half-brother held his tongue in astonishment. Without another word, Thunderpaw and Turtlepaw helped Horsepaw to his feet and led him to the medicine cat den.

"Have you settled in? I hope the nursery is comfortable enough," Fernstar started off with a small smile. The meeting between Fernstar, Firfoot and Sage began with idle chatter.

"It's great," Sage replied. "It's quiet and there's lots of space for the kits. Thank you, for all this, Fernstar."

"It's simply what we do for our own. Our kin," the leader stated, looking briefly at Firfoot.

"So, what is it?" Firfoot asked. The mother of Sage wasn't aware of the purpose of the meeting. Every spare or moment was spent with her daughter. Every spare thought was taken by her deceased mate, Adderstrike.

"I thought it would be good to discuss matters of transition, and anything you would like to share," Fernstar suggested uneasily. Sage glanced downward, thinking it through. *I can't tell her... I can't tell them*. To Sage's relief, her mother spoke up.

"When will the ceremony be?" Firfoot posed the question. Fernstar frowned and looked toward her sister.

"What do you mean?"

"Sagepaw's warrior ceremony, of course!"

"*Mother*," Sage muttered, appalled at the proposition.

"Firfoot, she can't be made a warrior..."

"Why not?" Firfoot challenged. "Sagepaw has gone through more than any of us!"

"Sagepaw, would you-" Fernstar tried to say.

"Anything you have to say, you can say it in front of Sagepaw!" Firfoot cut her off. Fernstar sighed, sending a small glance of pity toward Sage.

"The situation is not specified in our laws. However, it is the choice of the leader and mentor of the apprentice to determine when they are ready to become a full fledged member of SkyClan. Without at least six moons of training, it is unorthodox and unheard of to simply create a warrior out of someone," Fernstar tried to explain. "You will become a warrior, in time. I will speak will Grayfrost soon."

"Thank you," Sage simply said in reply. "And what about the kits?"

"What about them?" Firfoot muttered. Sage and Fernstar sent Firfoot a glare.

"Fernstar, the father is not McNaire. The kits I had with McNaire are dead. Gone. I had these kits with a tom I loved..."

"As far as I am concerned, the father does not change anything. McNaire has no claim to cats with warrior blood. The kits will be raised as Warriors, as you wish."

"Thank you," Sage gave a quick sigh of relief.

"I'm sorry this is so stressful," Fernstar sympathized. "I am just happy you're home. Truly. We all are very happy."

"I'm happy to be home. Would you like to meet the kits?"

"I would love to," Fernstar smiled. "But one last thing!"

"Yes?"

"How long will Ned be staying with us?" Fernstar asked curiously. No one had spoken to the young stoic rogue. Ned was quiet and frankly, a mystery to everyone except Sage.

"I'm not sure. I still need to speak with him. Is it alright if he stays for the time being?"

"Of course," Fernstar replied. "Just let me know. I want to make his stay comfortable for him and the clan."

Sage nodded, suddenly aware she had crossed a divide between two worlds. Rogue and warrior.

# Chapter 27

[image]

SkyClan-
**Allegiances**:

**Leader**: Fernstar- a brown tabby she cat with a white underbelly and paws. She has bright green eyes.

**Deputy**: Grayfrost- a huge gray tabby tom with long thick fur and electric blue eyes.

**Medicine Cat**:
Swampfur- a brown and ginger tortoiseshell tom with dark green eyes.
**Apprentice**:
Horsepaw- brown tabby tom with yellow eyes. 9.5 moons.

**Warriors**:
Yellowbird- a golden tabby furred she cat with white paws and dark eyes.

Ryepelt- a golden furred tom with longer fur and pointy ears. He has warm brown eyes.

Windwhisker- a gray furred tom with black stripes lashing out from his nose. He has yellow eyes.

Sorrelfoot- a plain gray she cat with emerald green eyes.

Firfoot- a tortoiseshell she cat with brown paws and yellow eyes.

Shrikeclaw- a gray tabby tom with gold eyes.

Honeynose- a black furred she cat with golden eyes, a pink nose, and a taste for honey.

**Apprentices**:

Sandpaw- tan furred she cat with brown eyes. 9. 5 moons. Mentor is Windwhisker.

Larkpaw- gray long furred tabby she cat with pale green eyes. 7.5 moons. Mentor is Fernstar.

Sparrowpaw- gray tabby tom with dark blue eyes. 7.5 moons. Mentor is Shrikeclaw.

Thunderpaw- gray tabby tom with yellow eyes. 7 moons. Mentor is Grayfrost.

Turtlepaw- a silver furred she cat with white patches along her back and on her paws. She has pale green eyes. 6 moons. Mentor is Firfoot.

Swallowpaw- a gray furred she cat with blue eyes. 6 moons. Mentor is Sorrelfoot.

Blackpaw- a dark furred tom with pale green eyes. 6 moons. Mentor is Ryepelt.

**Queens**:
Shinyflower- silver furred she cat with a single white patch that is shaped like a blossom. Her eyes are pale green.

Sage- a dark golden tabby she cat with pale green eyes. **Kits**: Adderkit (tom), Opalkit (she cat), Goldkit (tom), and Whitekit (tom).

**Kits**:
Adderkit- a golden tabby tom with a black tipped tail, and toes. He has amber eyes. 3.5 moons old.

Opalkit- a golden tabby she cat with amber eyes. 3.5 moons old.

Goldkit- a golden furred tom with brown eyes. 3.5 moons old.

Whitekit- a white furred tom with light green eyes. 3.5 moons old.

**Elders**:
Sunnystripe- a golden tabby tom who lost his sight and had to retire

prematurely.

Silverclaw- old silver tom with a thick ragged pelt.

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**Rogues**:

Grimsby- a white furred tom, scrawny and old with yellow eyes.

McNaire- a large black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes.

Ned- a young Russian blue tom. 10 moons old.

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"Ned? Is that you?" Sage whispered into the dark. It was still dark, and the moony cast an every shadow over the camp.

"Yeah," he mumbled, emerging from the shadows.

"You scared me for a second," Sage briefly chuckled.

"I'm sorry," he apologized quick.

"Where have you been? It's been days since we've last spoken. I couldn't find you anywhere! I would've thought you left if the kits hadn't claimed to have seen you," Sage explained.

"Patrolling. Like the Warriors do," Ned answered quietly.

"Patrolling?"

"Yes. I just, walk around the territory. It's nothing like the barnlands, or the house, or the backyard," he replied with a hint of wonder.

"Have you ever been outside? Since you came to Grimsby's?"

"A couple of times."

"Isn't it big?" Sage said.

"Bigger than I ever imagined. The moors seem like they'll never end. The trees reach into the sky... and the sky..."

"I know what you mean," Sage smiled, sharing a glance upward with Ned.

"In the barn, I never saw the sky."

"I never saw the sky until I left the barn," Ned remarked. "But it wasn't wonderful back then. Nothing was wonderful that night."

"Ned," Sage whispered. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, not really," he mumbled. Instead, an urgent warning replaced his words. "I think we should go."

"Go? But Ned-"

"I've been patrolling. And... I don't feel good. I feel the earth, the forest and the streams. I see all the things. And the clan cats know every rock and leaf on their territory! Yet... they can't see what I can see... they don't see the fake trails the scattered makings of a nest. The scent of a tom. The scent of a masked rogue," Ned paused after a long explanation. He fidgeted and frowned. "I don't feel good. I don't want anything to happen to you or the kits."

"The Warriors are expecting he attack. They're prepared. If we leave, we give him a clear shot at hurting us!" Sage argued.

"I... I don't know! Okay!" Ned grew defensive and anxious. "I just... Something bad is going to happen. *I know it.*"

"Ned, will you stay with the kits and I? Please. If something bad happens, you will be here for them," Sage pleaded.

"There's nothing here for me... In the clan. Except you and these kits. I have to go back to Grimsby. I want to go tomorrow-"

"But tomorrow? Ned, they're taking the first patrol to the barn lands tomorrow," Sage reminded him of what Fernstar had announced a day ago. Sage didn't like the idea, but was assured she would be protected within camp.

"It's the best day to go. If I go any other day, I risk McNaire finding me. And with my pelt, he'd remember me," Ned explained. Anxiety reached his toes and kept his mind from wandering. All Ned could focus on was Grimsby and the security of home.

"I will miss you, more than you know," Sage whispered a bitter sweet goodbye.

"I love you Sage. I haven't had many friends but maybe it's because I have you," Ned said. "Remember. Don't let Opalkit push around Whitekit too much. And Adderkit. Tell him stories about the snake he was named after."

"I will," Sage replied, warmed by her friend's fond words. The two cats touched noses.

"Promise me, you'll be safe."

"I promise," Sage replied. "You too. Run fast."

Within the apprentice's den, Thunderpaw stared across the den. His eyes were wide open, scanning the den, waiting for daylight. Horsepaw slept beside him, quieter than others. Sandpaw was across the den, a nest next to Larkpaw where she breathed deeply throughout the night. There were times Sandpaw would violently awake, murmuring the name of Shrewpaw.

The newly made apprentices were loud sleepers, except for Swallowpaw. Thunderpaw often found his restless eyes finding her smooth gray figure. Her soft face was calm, serene and comforting. When Thunderpaw doubted that there was any good left in the world, he gazed at Swallowpaw.

Unfortunately, his eyes settled on Sparrowpaw. His half-brother was the tabby image of his mother, as well as Larkpaw. Thunderpaw reflected on how hard it must have been for Sorrelfoot, to gaze upon him everyday and realize the son of a rogue looked more like Grayfrost than her own children. Although he should have felt pity, every time he glanced at Sparrowpaw, he only felt remorse. After much meditation, he knew he had to come to a solution.

Thunderpaw knew the remorse between Sparrowpaw and him had to come to an end. *StarClan would want it.*

"Thunderpaw? Are you awake?" Horsepaw whispered.

"Yes," he murmured. "It's a big day."

"We can't go on the patrol-"

"I know," he murmured. "But our clanmates are out there."

"Are you worried Thunderpaw? About Grayfrost?"

"No," Thunderpaw retorted coldly. He looked Horsepaw in the eye. "Grayfrost takes care of himself." Horsepaw nodded. "What about your father Horsepaw? Do you worry about him?"

"I am glad he's protecting camp today," Horsepaw stated. "I couldn't lose him."

"What about Fernstar?"

"My mother is growing stronger everyday. Shrewpaw's death will always hurt her. But she's recovering," Horsepaw said. "Hopefully, she finds it in herself to forgive me."

Thunderpaw marveled at the depth of grief Fernstar must have faced. Horsepaw's relationship with his living kin would forever be influenced by the death of Shrewpaw.

"We better go outside," Horsepaw proposed, as he saw Turtlepaw stir uncomfortably. Thunderpaw followed Horsepaw's eyes to the sleeping she cat, and Thunderpaw nodded.

Thunderpaw and Horsepaw left the apprentice's den and walked out into the bleak morning. The clouds were gray and every cat could sense a storm coming. When weather morphed into threats, many cats had the uncanny ability to feel it on their spine, in their toes, or by the gentle twitch of a tail. It reminded warriors, kittypets and rogues alike, that they are one with the sky, and shall return it.

"Are you hungry?" Thunderpaw asked.

"A little. You?"

"Very," he replied. The two apprentice's approached the prey pile and investigated its remains. The patrol was awake and already eating their meal. Only two mice and a scrawny little robin was left.

Thunderpaw took the robin and a mouse, while Horsepaw took the remaining mouse.

"You've been eating a lot lately," Horsepaw remarked as they reclined near the medicine cat den. Thunderpaw shrugged.

"I'm just really hungry nowadays. My legs hurt and I'm always out on a patrol or training," Thunderpaw said.

"Are you sure it's wise to eat so much?" Horsepaw brought up, trying not to be rude. "You'll look like a queen soon enough..."

"Don't be silly," Thunderpaw scoffed. "With all the work I'm doing... I'll never be fat!"

"Oh yeah?"

"I will never be fat," Thunderpaw insisted. "If I am, you can come scold me yourself."

"I will," Horsepaw grinned. "I'm glad we have a day to ourselves today. I haven't talked to you in a long time."

"I know," his friend acknowledged. "We've never really had time to talk about what happened that day."

"We don't have to talk about it-"

"I asked Turtlepaw," Thunderpaw cut him off. "You stood up for me. You corrected Sparrowpaw's rumor and tried to fight for me."

"I was just doing what was right," Horsepaw mumbled a bit flustered. The memory of the quarrel was alive in his mind. Horsepaw hated the fact he couldn't defend himself or a fellow clanmate, like Turtlepaw.

"You're a true Warrior. A friend, a Warrior and a brilliant Medicine cat," Thunderpaw declared. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Get fat," Horsepaw smirked.

"Exactly," Thunderpaw laughed. "Horsepaw. Some friendships are fine. Ya know. Like Sandpaw, or Honeynose or Blackpaw. But then there's ours. Our friendship will last lifetimes."

"Do you really mean that?" Horsepaw asked.

"I do."

Thunderpaw and Horsepaw held each other's gaze for a long period, until the clan was ordered to attention. Cats congregated around the rockpile as expected. Thunderpaw and Horsepaw followed and found themselves sitting next to the elders, Sunnystripe and Silverclaw.

"Let all cats gather along the rockpile!" Fernstar's voice boomed throughout the ravine. Her voice bounced off the rocky walls and made their way to her subjects. The leader's gentle and nurturing voice was replaced with the voice of a true warrior, ready to strike.

"Today, we shall take back the barn lands and end McNaire, once and for all! The lands are said to be deserted, and that rogues and McNaire alike have fled to other areas. It is SkyClan's destiny to rule all that StarClan has entrusted us with. Today, we shall begin accomplishing this destiny with this patrol!"

Fernstar leaped off the perched position and joined her deputy. Together, they lead the way out of the ravine, followed by the rest of the patrol. Fernstar, Grayfrost, Windwhisker, Yellowbird, Sorrelfoot, Shrikeclaw, and Honeynose. The only Warriors left behind were Ryepelt and Shinyflower, entrusted to protect and watch over the elders, apprentices and kits. As the Warriors left, Silverclaw and Sunnystripe congregated around the rockpile.

Silverclaw began to ramble something to Sunnystripe, who seemed infuriated.

"Just like the first time," Silverclaw scowled. "Didn't they learn

anything from the first time!When you lost your eyes-"

"Enough," Sunnystripe growled. "They can't hear you from here, you old croak!"

"McNaire's going to walk into this camp and no one is going to do anything about it," Silverclaw retorted.

"Silverclaw, wait-"

"What!"

"What do you mean?" Thunderpaw raced after the elder. Horsepaw watched Thunderpaw scurry after the elder, and followed in curiosity.

Silverclaw turned to face Thunderpaw. The elder gave him a quick glance over and saw he was worthy of the truth. "When you've lived for as many moons as I have, you learn that history repeats itself when others are too ignorant to notice. Leaving the camp with less warriors is stupid! Mark my words Thunderpaw-"

"Keep watch with the other apprentices," Sunnystripe interrupted the eldest member of the clan. He told Thunderpaw, "It's going to be fine if everyone uses their senses."

Sunnystripe ushered Silverclaw back to the elder's den. Thunderpaw turned away and joined Horsepaw.

"What was that about?" Horsepaw asked.

"Silverclaw thinks McNaire is going to come to the camp, when we're not as protected."

"What do you think?"

"What do I think? I think he's a nut," Thunderpaw remarked. "My father has spoken with Sage. The night she fled, McNaire killed his male offspring and McCallistar, his own brother. McNaire has no one."

"How can you be sure?"

"I have no idea. I don't even know what McNaire looks like. All I know is that we're going to be fine," Thunderpaw reassured his friend. The gray tabby tabby turned and shaded back to the apprentice's den  just outside, the rest of the apprentice's sat around anxiously.

"Hey," Thunderpaw greeted them calmly.

"Thunderpaw, is there any more prey?" Blackpaw asked.

"I don't think so," he replied.

"Too bad we can't go out on a hunting patrol," Blackpaw sighed.

"I wish," Turtlepaw mumbled.

"It's better this way," Swallowpaw interjected. "It's safer and warmer in camp..."

Two apprentice's slipped away from the rest. Larkpaw and Sparrowpaw headed towards Sky's den, flank to flank in the cold wind that sweeper through the open regions of the ravine. Without the rocky barriers, the ravine could be a chilling place.

"You still haven't told me what happened the other day. Who did that to your face?" Larkpaw asked. Larkpaw examined her brother's swollen cheek, bruised and inflamed.

Sparrowpaw turned his cheek away and bit his tongue.

"I can't keep covering for you," Larkpaw growled in reply. "Sorrelfoot wants to see you. And when she does, she'll want to know who marked up your face."

"Thunderpaw. I was talking to Herb when the medicine cat attacked me. Then when I showed Herb the ground, Thunderpaw slammed my face into the ground," Sparrowpaw explained his side of the story. Larkpaw scowled.

"He can't get away with that," Larkpaw snapped. "But you shouldn't talk to Horsepaw. It's not your place. If you ever get into trouble with him, neither of us will ever be deputy."

"Fernstar doesn't care," Sparrowpaw rolled his eyes.

"She does care," Larkpaw corrected her brother. "I would know, she's my mentor. *Remember*."

"You only remind me everyday," Sparrowpaw remarked sourly.

"Listen," Larkpaw snapped. "Stop getting into fights with them. If we stay on the path Sorrelfoot has created for us, there's nothing we can't achieve."

"With Thunderpaw always in the way-"

"Thunderpaw is nothing. No one even notices him anymore if it weren't for all the punishments!" Larkpaw declared. "You're not using your head."

"Shut up," Sparrowpaw spat with venom.

"I'm going back to my nest."

"Sorrelfoot doesn't have all the answers. She's not as smart as you think," Sparrowpaw hollered at his sister. Larkpaw snickered and whipped around.

"You have no idea what's going on. You're ignorant," Larkpaw scowled. "You're going to ruin everything if you slip again. I'm going to tell Sorrelfoot when she gets back!"

"Go ahead."

Sparrowpaw turned around and gazed back up at Sky's den. The huge boulder was a symbol of strength, new beginnings and wisdom, for the cats of SkyClan. For Sparrowpaw, it was a littering ground.

After Sparrowpaw had made dung behind the boulder, he walked a few paces away. Falling into a hunter's crouch, he stretched and let out a wild yawn. Then the tom found a nice ledge amongst the ravine, away from Larkpaw, Horsepaw and Thunderpaw.

Cuddling amongst the stone walls, Sparrowpaw shut his eyes and

took a nap.

"They need help!" Thunderpaw yelled. Thunderpaw's voice reached Sparrowpaw, who opened his eyes, just a sliver to see.

Thunderpaw was atop the ravine, and scanned it quickly with his eyes. The apprentice's breath was heavy. Thunderpaw appeared exhausted. Sparrowpaw grimaced as Thunderpaw's eyes spotted him.

"Sparrowpaw!" He called out. Sparrowpaw's eyes looked away, hoping Thunderpaw would find help elsewhere.

"What is it?" Sparrowpaw grunted.

"Come quick! It's Grayfrost!"

Sparrowpaw grunted and shot to his feet. The urgency in Thunderpaw's voice motivated him. Within seconds, Sparrowpaw had climbed the ravine and reached the top. But Thunderpaw was gone, already racing through the forest.

"Thunderpaw! What is it? Wait up!" Sparrowpaw called, racing after him.

"It's Grayfrost! We have to hurry! Come on Sparrowpaw!" Thunderpaw called back to him briefly. Sparrowpaw followed Thunderpaw, tree-lengths behind.

The icy wind numbed Sparrowpaw's cheek and his senses. Thunderpaw seemed to run fine, while Sparrowpaw shivered under the shock. The cold air stung his lungs. Sparrowpaw's thoughts and focus were frozen on the task at hand. *Grayfrost. Grayfrost. Grayfrost...*

"Thunderpaw! Wait up!" Sparrowpaw hollered again, followed by a few coughs. His chest burned from the strenuous pace. Sparrowpaw stopped for only a moment and took a deep breath. When he looked up, there was no sight of Thunderpaw.

As the wind howled through the trees, Sparrowpaw's scent was

thwarted. He could not recover Thunderpaw's scent or the scent of the patrol. To make things worse, the weather grew worse. Flurries trickled down from the sky, finding a way to block his vision. Cold and confused, Sparrowpaw came to another stop.

"Thunderpaw! Where are you!"

Only the wind replied. Spinning around, Sparrowpaw tried to find a distinct scent or path. When he did, Sparrowpaw came face to face with Thunderpaw.

"There you are! Where the StarClan have you been?" Sparrowpaw questioned. Thunderpaw did not reply.

"Where's Grayfrost? Is he-"

"He'll be alright," Thunderpaw said. Sparrowpaw narrowed his eyes and studied his half-brother. Silent and stoic, both toms stood. A few deep breaths later, and Sparrowpaw finally came to his senses.

"You brought me out here to kill me," Sparrowpaw muttered. Thunderpaw did not reply. Instead, he unsheathed his claws. Sparrowpaw chuckled. "You can try."

Sparrowpaw made the first move, bursting out of his stoic state. His slashed across Thunderpaw's front. His opponent evaded his strike. Sparrowpaw snickered and decided to execute the latest maneuver Shrikeclaw taught him. Leaping off the ground he propelled himself forward but brought his hind legs up, ready to take them down Thunderpaw's belly. Thunderpaw was expecting it. Thunderpaw rolled under Sparrowpaw, who fell into a crouch. Before he could turn around, he felt Thunderpaw's weight slam him into the ground. Thunderpaw's claws were latched to Sparrowpaw's back, sinking deeper into his flesh with every movement Sparrowpaw made.

"How can... you're a bad fighter..."

"I've never been a bad fighter," Thunderpaw snapped. "Just a good liar."

Thunderpaw made one last move, sending a vicious bite to Sparrowpaw's neck. Sparrowpaw's painful, paralyzing howl was

muffled by the winds of leaf-bare.

Ned walked through the forest, with all hairs on end. His ears were perked in apprehension. His claws were unsheathed. The forest was eery and quiet. He wind had howled violently for most of the morning, then suddenly, stopped. When it did, an alarming call met Ned's ears.

"Sparrowpaw! Oh StarClan... no... no..."

"What happened? What is it?"

"McNaire! It's McNaire! He's struck again!"

The cries of a she cat rippled throughout the forest. Although he was reluctant, Ned followed the calls until they led him to the patrol. The sight was enough to understand what had occurred.

The patrol was returning, when they came upon Sparrowpaw, lying on the forest floor with his entrails splayed across the frosty grass. At his side was Sorrelfoot. No one questioned the culprit. No one questioned the small bite on Sparrowpaw's neck. No one questioned the snow that covering bloody paw prints. No one questioned the shocked look in Sparrowpaw's eyes.

"I will kill McNaire," Sorrelfoot vowed.

"We will," Grayfrost looked to her with a gaze of stone.